

THE DIGITAL ABSURD

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by

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SUMMARY

I believe that the concept of the absurd, as described in philosophy and reflected in works of drama and literature, provides an unusual and helpful perspective from which to view the emerging field of digital media. In my opinion, absurd principles can help us understand the mixed feelings we may have when engaging with digital media: joy and frustration, play and despair, significance and nonsense.

I intend to explore the concept of the absurd through a handful of authors and works, including the philosophy of Camus and the literature and drama of Pinter, Beckett, Roussel, and the Oulipo. I will use these works to analyze characteristics of absurdist works and then extend this analysis to characteristics and theory of digital media. I believe an absurdist analysis may bring a new vantage point to the study of digital media, from which we can see not only the advantages and liberation it offers but also the ever-present threat of nonsense it entails.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

William James remarked that philosophy begins with discomfort, and it is in discomfort that my thinking about the digital absurd begins. Over several years of working with information technology, exploring digital artifacts, and studying digital media theory, at times a certain feeling of meaninglessness or emptiness has come upon me; while difficult to describe precisely, I characterize the feeling as one of weariness or disconnection, perhaps even of alienation. A few short vignettes will provide a glimpse of this feeling.

1.1 Ryan's game

Several years ago while I was visiting my brother's house, my 10-year-old nephew Ryan insisted on showing me a videogame that had recently captivated him. I have no particular interest in video games, so I feigned interest and watched him play. As I watched, he announced nearly every event before it happened – he obviously had enough hours of gameplay under his belt to form a mental map of most of the possibilities. He seemed simultaneously apathetic and excited as he predicted what would happen at each turn. I left the room wondering what might account for this mix of ennui and enthusiasm, and why he bothered continuing to play a game whose novelty he may already have consumed entirely. What meaning or pleasure could he possibly derive from this exercise?

One might interpret this as demonstrating an aspect of meaningless repetition in computer games, or even more broadly in digital media. I intend this example only to portray an odd mix of issues including algorithmic repetition, meaning, pleasure, and boredom. I do not intend it as a condescending or disdainful commentary on the

meaning or pleasure others derive from games; nor do I want this observation to be seen as part of a conservative cultural critique of computer games or of technology in general. Arguments that accuse technology of creating too much information, delivering it too rapidly, and allowing insufficient time for reflection may add something important to our understanding of culture; but even if we accept these ideas, there certainly may be other redeeming elements of computer games. Ryan may simply have wanted to demonstrate his mastery of the game rather than focusing on the meaning he derived from it. Nonetheless, Ryan's game suggests a point of departure for a notion of the digital absurd: perhaps digital media intensifies algorithmic repetition in our media and, in doing so, raises questions about the relationship between meaning and pleasure.

1.2 IM, Twitter, Flickr, Facebook, and More...

Over the past thirty years, digital media research and product development have created a remarkable array of tools with which to communicate. The relatively crude email technology of the 1970s and 1980s offered only a glimpse of the bewildering extravagance to come in later decades: multiple instant messaging systems such as AIM, Yahoo Instant Messenger, and MSN Messenger; dozens of social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and LinkedIn; shared media sites like YouTube and Flickr; and the latest method of up-to-the-second communication among friends, Twitter, which bills itself as a service that “allows friends, family, and coworkers to communicate and stay connected through the exchange of quick, frequent answers to one simple question: What are you doing?” (Twitter web site).

There is much at which to marvel here: on one level, the creativity of new product development involved in these communication channels is remarkable, and the large number of users suggests a great deal of public interest in these technologies. But at times I have also felt somewhat overwhelmed by the proliferation of communication

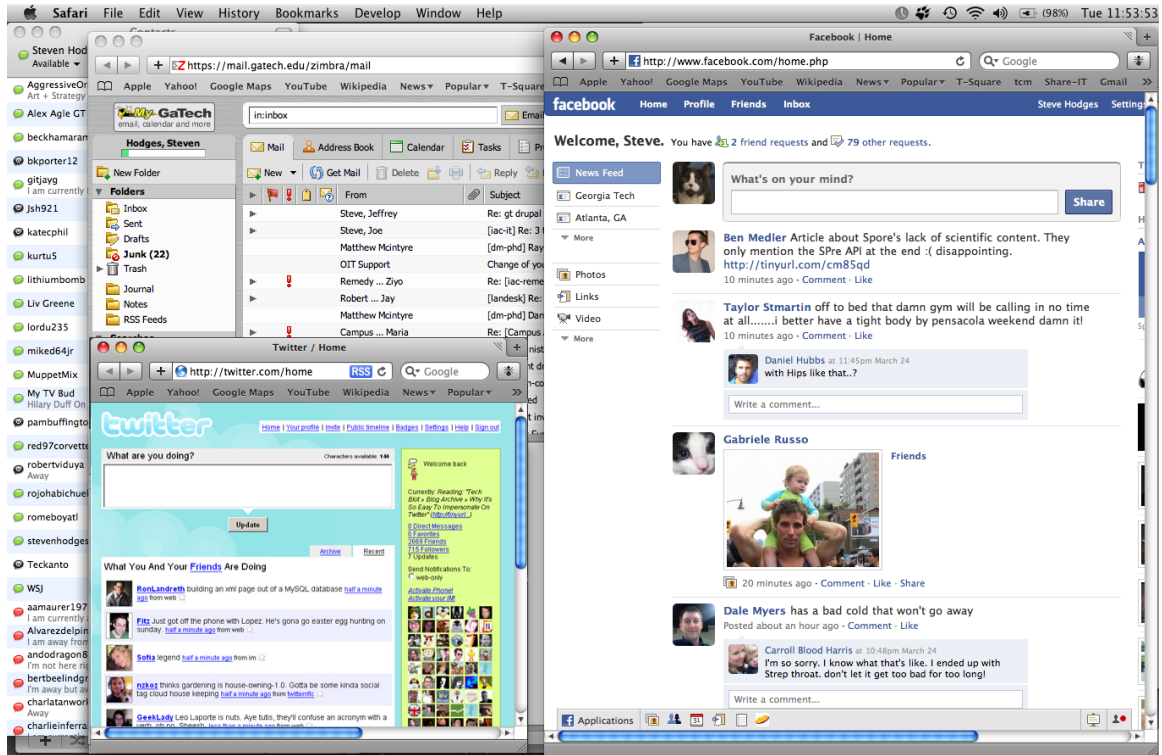


Figure 1: Proliferation of Communication Channels

technologies. Amidst the flood of communication I feel less time for absorbing or reflecting on the meaning of these various messages; the next blurb awaits mental processing, and others will be arriving soon on this site and the next. In some moments this strikes me as an excess of technological proliferation, to the detriment of meaning – in other words, an overemphasis on the production and distribution of relatively impoverished content. This proliferation sparks a feeling of emptiness, and it is this feeling, in part, that I want to explore in relation to the digital.

These initial broad vignettes suggest several possible avenues of inquiry, not all of which we will follow in the development of our concepts. In addition to the features of repetition, proliferation, algorithm, meaning and nonsense, we could focus on the role of the social in media such as Twitter and Facebook, the role of generational literacy in understanding Ryan's game experience, or the differing experiences of graphical,

textual, or other media forms. Our developing notions will focus primarily on textual and literary experiences, but these initial vignettes nonetheless provide a notion of the kinds of feelings that set us onto our conceptual quest.

1.3 *Notorious*

A further episode takes us a bit closer to the textual examples that will form the main part of our explorations. Apple’s “Movies” Dashboard widget provides a convenient way to search local movie listings. Recently, while browsing for new films, I came across a listing for the film *Notorious*; the summary suggested that it focused on the life of the rapper Notorious B.I.G. “from his beginnings as a Brooklyn crack dealer to East Coast hip-hop sensation.” In the next moment, I read the cast listing: “Cary Grant, Ingrid Bergman, Claude Rains.” A moment of confusion followed in which the two *Notorious* films collided uncertainly: the 1946 black-and-white Hitchcock classic thriller juxtaposed uncomfortably with a contemporary urban story featuring drugs, hip-hop, and violence. Of course, it became clear that the widget had somehow mixed information from different database entries.

We might simply dismiss this as a commonplace technical glitch: We laugh, or we become annoyed, and we simply move on. But to me, the brief seconds of confusion contain something significant. As we struggle to make sense of the information presented, the usually unobtrusive dimension of code underlying the words comes to the foreground. We imagine an underlying database and perhaps an errant search performed solely on string equality of the “movie title” field. In the aftermath of this episode, we might picture this underlying dimension as one of confused meaninglessness, as a realm of pure nonsense susceptible to such preposterous errors. Whether or not this view is justified, this experience does at least bring into question how the dimension of code can affect the everyday production and reception of meaning, and it illustrates how this dimension can intrude to create complex feelings of confusion,

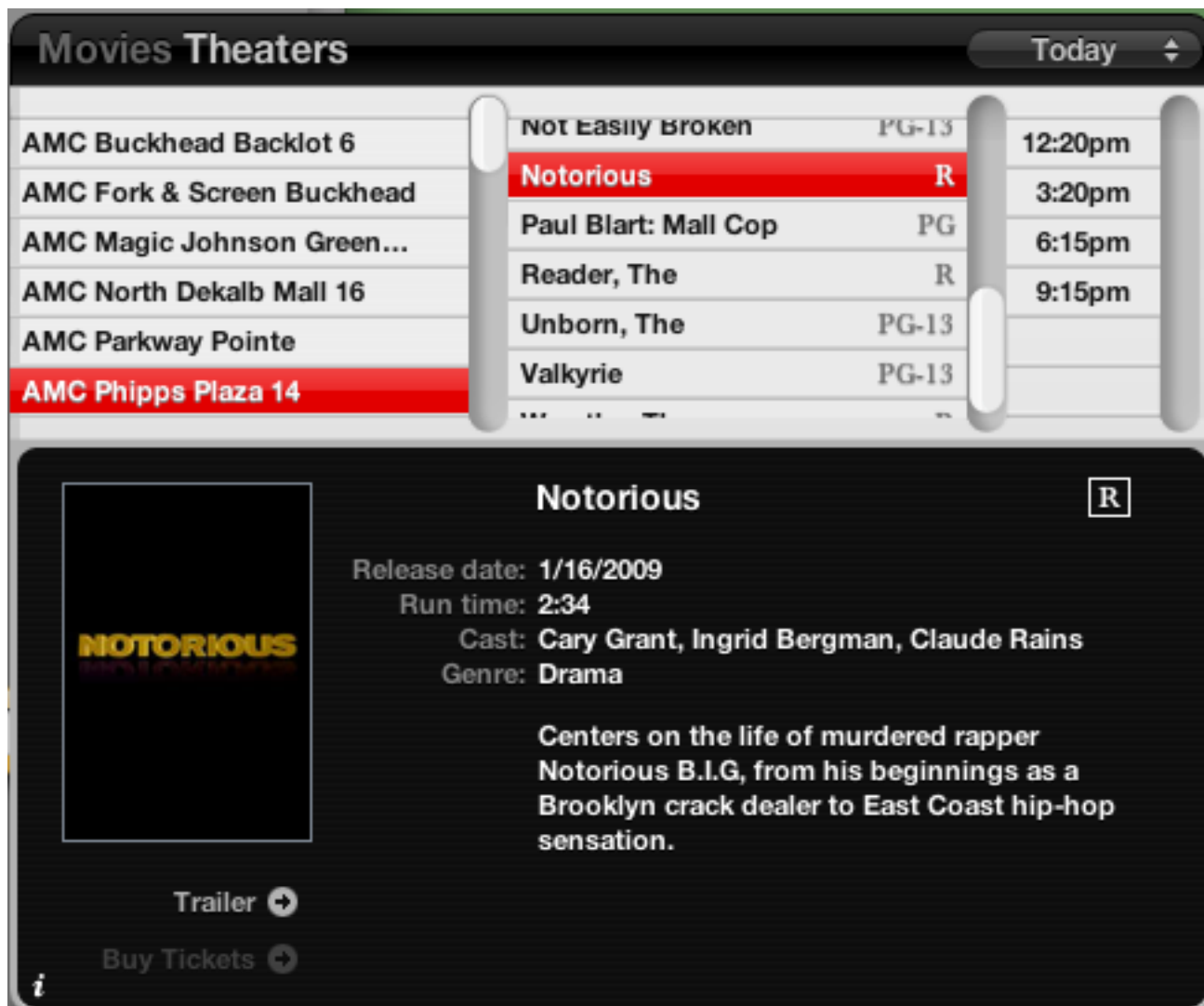


Figure 2: Apple's Movie Widget (with error)

uncertainty, humor, unexpected juxtaposition, and loss of meaning.

1.4 *Oulipian Fascination*

A final vignette takes us into the literary realm of our main explorations – in particular, the literature of the Oulipo, a group of authors and mathematicians who seek to explore the broad relationships between algorithm and literature. Begun in 1960s France, the name is a shortened form of *Ouvrier de Litterature Potentielle* (loosely translated as “Workshop of Potential Literature”). I first learned of this group in Professor Steven Mamber’s graduate seminar entitled “The History of Digital Media”; at first the Oulipo seemed an odd topic of study within digital media, but the connection soon proved strong and fascinating. In brief, Oulipians seek to explore both established and new literary forms, often involving mathematical rules or structural constraints. For example, the group found renewed interest in the lipogram, an older technique in which the writer consciously avoids using one or more letters; Oulipians also developed new rules for literary creation, such as the “S + 7” method, in which each substantive (noun) of a text is replaced with the seventh following it in the dictionary.

My reaction to such techniques has always been largely one of pleasure and play, though such amusement is always accompanied by nagging questions about the reasons for my enjoyment and about how such literature fits into a broader intellectual scheme. The standard views of the Oulipo’s significance to digital media – empowering the user to make choices, the proliferation of possibilities based on combinatoric rules, repetition of the same story in slightly different configurations – are certainly worthwhile, but I have always thought there was something more to this connection. For me, there is a certain interest and enjoyment in discovering the underlying technique or pattern of Oulipian works, not unlike discovering the mechanisms at work in machines of any sort. But beyond this aspect is the fact that Oulipian machines

manipulate symbols which carry meaning, and in their symbolic manipulations they create or destroy meaning through combinatoric or algorithmic juxtaposition. In this way, the Oulipo seems to stand at the frontier between language and code, making incursions into each territory with varying and often unexpected results. On one level of reading, many Oulipian works demonstrate normal literary sense, but this is always accompanied by an alternate sense (or nonsense) of technical algorithm. While some may conceive of Oulipian works as mere linguistic showmanship, devoid of serious purpose, for me the Oulipo demonstrates a tension at work within many kinds of digital media: that between code and language, between the underlying and the overt, between machine and product, between a literary sensibility and an information sensibility. With this episode we arrive at one of the core issues to be considered in our explorations – the dissonance or affinities between language and code.

I do not mean to suggest that alienation and emptiness constitute my only responses to digital media. Certainly there are pleasures too: Even at the level of code, which is not often suggested as the locus of digital pleasure, there is a certain creative enjoyment, perhaps akin to the enjoyment of mathematical proof. There is a sense of absolute knowability when one digs through technical layers while attempting to trace the behavior (or misbehavior) of code or protocol interactions: one feels the exhilarating ability to achieve complete understanding if only given the proper vantage point from which to observe, the proper variables to watch, the proper network ports to monitor. And there is a distinct pleasure involved in integrating sometimes disparate information technologies, and in knowing that such connectivity is possible given the common digital underpinning.

Beyond these rather technical pleasures, of course, dimensions of narrative, artistic, and scientific pleasure and discovery exist, and the digital contributes significantly to them. Without denying these contributions, the digital absurd seeks to elaborate a language for understanding the kinds of digital discomfort recounted in the episodes

above. Rather than simply marginalizing such situations as temporary setbacks in a dominant scheme of technical progress, innovation, and creativity, I choose to explore such episodes to discover whether they can reveal aspects of the digital that have been insufficiently explored – aspects that could contribute to Digital Media’s evolving understanding of its object of study.

1.5 Seeking Consolation in Philosophy and Literature

The meaningless repetition of Ryan’s game, the nonsensical juxtaposition created by a technical glitch in a movie listing, the feeling of emptiness among the abundance of communication technologies, and the tension between code and language inherent in Oulipian literature: Perhaps these disparate feelings are related in some way. I turn to philosophy and to literature and drama in an attempt to explore and understand these feelings.

When the sixth-century Roman statesman and scholar Anicius Boethius was accused of conspiracy, he was imprisoned to await his trial and eventual execution. Having lost his status and freedom, he attempted during his imprisonment to work through his despair by questioning ideas of fate, happiness, the pain of life, and God’s role in the universe. The resulting book, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, is structured as a dialogue between Boethius and his spiritual guardian, who takes the form of Athena, goddess of wisdom. Through this dialogue, Boethius seeks consolation despite his dreadful fate.

I do not want to overstate the link between Boethius and a prospective digital absurd, but I choose the example only to introduce the idea of turning to philosophy for consolation in the face of crisis. Certainly, Boethius faced a different sort of crisis from the feelings of emptiness, meaninglessness, or tension mentioned in the introduction, and I do not seek to equate these situations: Ours is not life-threatening. But the idea of consolation through philosophical inquiry seems generally useful, and

it is in that spirit that I mention Boethius. Like him, I hope to gather intellectual perspectives that could help address a crisis – in this case a crisis of meaning brought about by certain aspects of digital media.

As we cast about in the realm of philosophy and literature for concepts and terms that can help us understand our mixture of feelings, one candidate seems especially promising: the absurd. Broadly, this concept seems to capture at least some of our feelings of digital discomfort, and the discourse of the absurd includes nuances that go beyond the word’s typical connotations of unreasonableness or silliness; these nuances include a sense of frustrated expectation and of broken-down communication, the experience of comedic error, a downcast-yet-not-bitter sense of dashed hopes, and an interest in the hidden underpinnings of surface phenomena.

The philosophy of Albert Camus holds particular interest in our search for consolation, since he is identified most closely with the philosophical idea of the absurd, with its focus on feelings of emptiness amidst questions of meaning. Camus’ philosophy of the absurd captures something of the unexpected feeling of emptiness amidst the everyday that we saw in our *Notorious* example. For Camus the feeling of the absurd can come upon one unexpectedly, in the midst of everyday affairs; he writes: “At any streetcorner the feeling of absurdity can strike any man in the face.” Also, Camus’ absurd involves a chasm or divorce between the meaningless world and our human desire for meaningful explanation, for a firm foundation of meaning, for a familiar understanding. For Camus, encounters with nature, time, other people, and death can trigger the feeling of the absurd, a feeling of “strange otherness” and of lost meaning, not unlike that from the personal-messaging-run-amok example above. Finally, the idea of repetition figures into Camus’ thought, as he notes the repetitive nature of modern living:

Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar,

four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm – this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the 'why' arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement (Camus, *Myth*, 12).

Such thinking may offer insight into the feelings of emptiness that accompanied my observation of Ryan's game. As we recall Camus' well-known image of Sisyphus pushing a boulder up a hill, only to have it fall down and require him to repeat the task eternally, we wonder whether such thinking might capture some aspect of the digital.

Beyond Camus' philosophy, we will follow the concept of the absurd into the realm of literature and drama; here we will find additional elements of absurd thought that contribute to our developing understanding of the concept. While the writings of Camus are helpful in understanding the philosophical basis of the absurd, literary and dramatic works attempt to reveal the absurd through different methods. In contrast to the philosophical discourse of Camus and others, literature and drama offer a perhaps more direct, more visceral portrayal of the absurd. I believe the techniques of the literary and dramatic absurd may provide an alternate path to get at the feelings of emptiness and meaninglessness outlined above.

Examples of such techniques include linguistic proliferation and repetition in the work of Pinter and Beckett; these authors' works feature many situations in which meaning is drawn into question – even the meaning of everyday language normally assumed to be clear – and this often leads to amusingly tedious digressions that underscore a serious point about the uncertain foundations of language. Similar kinds of confusion involving messy proliferation of language, repetitive dialogue, and identity confusion contribute in a similar way to a feeling of uncertainty and undermined foundations.

In Beckett's work, amidst his brilliant employment of standard absurdist techniques, we catch a first glimpse of a different kind of technique – one that introduces an element of regularity and structure alongside the messiness and confusion found in Pinter's work. In examining Beckett's trilogy *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*, we shall see that this other set of techniques contrasts with standard absurdist technique through its emphasis on detail and specificity rather than uncertainty; its recurrence of narrative elements hints at an underlying narrative structure. As we pursue this other technique into the works of Raymond Roussel, we will find increasing reliance on specificity, structure, formula, and detail in the creation of a feeling of absurdity and questioning of meaning.

These alternative techniques will become prominent enough that we will adopt a name for the two techniques of the absurd: the *linguistic absurd* for the former and the *logical absurd* for the latter. The linguistic absurd plays on the indeterminacy of language and employs techniques of babbling, failed efforts of communication, repetition, and untidy proliferation to create tension between meaning and nonmeaning. Close readings of example works by Pinter and Beckett will help us establish an understanding of this mode and its techniques, and linguistic theory of Derrida will help explain how this sort of absurdist technique relates to the concept of meaning and creates a sense of discomfort with language.

The logical absurd, on the other hand, can be subtler than the linguistic and employs techniques of algorithmic or mathematical structuring (combinatoric arrangement of structural elements, for example), logical operations (contradiction, negation, paradox), geometric arrangement, or other non-signifying practices in the structure of the work. This concept will help us understand how an absurd sensibility may emerge from highly structured works such as those of the Oulipo, and it will also help us create a conceptual bridge between the traditional linguistic absurd and the

prospective digital absurd that we hope to explore. Example works of the logical absurd include Roussel's *Impressions of Africa* as well as Oulipian works by Perec (*Life A User's Manual*), Queneau (*Exercises In Style*), and Calvino (*If On A Winter's Night A Traveler*), along with certain aspects of Roussel's works. We will explore how the techniques employed in these works can create a sensibility that might plausibly be called absurd. We the readers may experience a taste of the logical absurd when we catch a fleeting and elusive glimpse of underlying code, as we did in the *Nocturnous* example above and as we do in many Oulipian works. The mathematical or algorithmic underpinning of these works may not announce themselves with fanfare, or they may not announce themselves at all, but nonetheless they seem to have the capacity to create an odd feeling, perhaps an absurd sensibility.

In writing about the life and works of Roussel, Michel Foucault perhaps captures something of the unsettling feeling evoked by the presence of the mechanisms of the logical absurd. By revealing some of the techniques Roussel used as creative spurs, Foucault suggests, he simultaneously provides satisfying answers but also creates a certain level of doubt; "the idea of a key, as soon as it is formulated, eludes its promise, or rather takes it beyond what it can deliver to a point where all of Roussel's language is placed in question." In other words, the existence of an underlying code, "systematically imposes a formless anxiety... each word at the same time energized and drained, filled and emptied by the possibility of there being yet another meaning, this one or that one, or neither one nor the other, but a third, or none" (Foucault, *Death*, 13) Perhaps Foucault hits here on part of the feeling of the logical absurd: an awareness of an underlying mechanism that draws into question overt linguistic meaning. At any moment we may become cognizant of the raw code underlying the mediated experience we struggle to understand as meaningful, and we thus confront a gap between the underlying and the explicit, between coded base and linguistic superstructure.

I acknowledge that the notion of the logical absurd falls somewhat outside of the conventional notion of absurdism. But “the absurd” is not an especially well-defined concept. Unlike a school of philosophic thought with accepted tenets or a group of artists working under a formal manifesto, “the absurd” is a term applied to the work of certain writers and playwrights by writers and journalists. Therefore I feel a certain flexibility in extending the term to examples not typically considered part of the absurd. Part of the work of this project will be to extend the notion of the absurd to cover new kinds of works and eventually to address some aspects of digital works. To do this we will need to establish a conceptual relationship among the philosophical, linguistic, and logical absurd in an effort to understand how the digital may relate to them.

At a broad level, I intend to pursue the question: Does it make sense to theorize a digital absurd, and could such a theory help explain aspects of the digital experience? Through exploration of the philosophical absurd and close readings of certain literary and dramatic absurdist works, I will develop a concept of the absurd that can be extended to cover other kinds of experimental literature less identified with traditional absurdist nonsense and more aligned with algorithmically or mathematically structured works. We will then explore whether this expanded concept can account for some aspects of the digital experience which have not yet been sufficiently explored.

In his article “The Automatic Writing of the World,” Baudrillard suggests an interesting interpretation of our attitudes in an increasingly virtualized world: We have absorbed the essence of the virtual into our very existence; in other words, the virtual has silently and without fanfare become a part of us. As Baudrillard suggests,

The virtual camera is in our heads. No need of a medium to reflect our problems in real time: every existence is telepresent to itself. The TV and the media long since left their media space to invest ‘real’ life from the inside, precisely as a virus does with a normal cell. No need of the

headset and the data suit: it is our will that ends up moving about the world as though inside a computer-generated image (Baudrillard, *Perfect Crime*, 26).

Perhaps we can consider a similar infiltration of the absurd. In the same way that the essence of the virtual has seeped into our consciousness to become omnipresent, perhaps digital media has introduced into our ‘normal’ lives aspects of the absurd, to the point we no longer recognize them as absurd. When we encounter the repetition, proliferation, and nonsensical aspects of digital media, perhaps they have become unremarkable and expected elements of our existence. Because of this subtle infiltration, we must now work to identify these aspects in our media and explore the feelings they may promote.

CHAPTER II

THE PHILOSOPHICAL ABSURD

2.1 Another Episode of Digital Discomfort

As with the episodes of discomfort from the introduction, perhaps an additional sketch of an everyday experience with the digital will provide a final bridge into the territory of the absurd.

Recently I decided to purchase an airline ticket to England; fares had dropped precipitously, and I intended to take advantage of the low prices. Visiting the Delta ticketing web site, I chose agreeable departure and return flights, verified the low price, and attempted to charge my Citibank credit card. However, the web page responded that the attempt to charge my card had been unsuccessful. Thinking I may have mistyped the number, I tried again, but to no avail. Unable to determine the problem, I simply used a different credit card to complete the transaction.

The next day I received an automated call from Citibank's "Fraud Early Warning" service, which monitors account activity for suspicious behavior. An automated female voice delivered the following message:

"This is Citibank Fraud Early Warning service calling. We've noticed unusual activity on your account and need you to verify a purchase. Did you spend . . . [slight pause, suggesting insertion via computer algorithm of the corresponding words for the numeric value; these words seemed to be spoken in a slightly different tone than the surrounding words] . . . zero dollars . . . [another slight pause] on a recent purchase? If so, press 1. If not, press 2."

I felt somewhat baffled and uncertain how to respond to the question. Did I spend zero dollars on a recent transaction? Mentally considering option 1, it seemed

conceivable to argue that I had spent zero dollars on uncountably many transactions, if I simply considered all possible transactions that I had *not* made. On the other hand, I did not recall that any non-imaginary recent purchases had cost zero dollars, so perhaps option 2 was appropriate. I felt a state of contradiction, a feeling that the automated voice’s prompt was a sort of trick question. In any case, I had pondered the options for too long, and the voice returned:

“We did not understand your response. Did you spend [pause] zero dollars [pause] on a recent purchase?”

Reflecting later on this experience, I realized that my attempted purchase on the Delta web site must have triggered Citibank’s fraud detection mechanism, and this was probably the reason I was unable to purchase the ticket. I speculated that somehow my account was suspended before I was able to make the purchase, and thus my “purchase” was recorded as \$0.00. It seemed that the “fraud early warning” call was perhaps not programmed to handle this situation elegantly.

2.1.1 Complexity of This Situation

While we might simply dismiss this episode as the result of a programming oversight or an inelegant algorithm, I believe we may be able to derive from it some points of departure for our thinking about the digital absurd. The seemingly prosaic nature of this experience conceals a certain complexity of feeling, containing elements of the comic, of logical contradiction, and of a kind of despair or frustration. More specifically, these feelings might include the following:

1. We may find humor in the juxtaposition of a relatively realistic human voice alongside a programmatically generated nonsensical question. The humor of the situation might be similar to witnessing a well-dressed, successful gentleman who unknowingly trails a piece of toilet paper on his shoe; we find humor in the contrast between images of dapper success on the one hand and oblivious

sloppiness on the other. In this case, tremendous diligence and resources have created a somewhat plausible automated conversation, only to be undermined by a glaring logical error. In other words, we find humor in the preposterous error embedded amidst an otherwise impressive technical performance.

2. The slight pause surrounding the phrase “zero dollars” provides a similar source of humor. The beginning of the question is delivered in plausibly human cadence, but we are surprised by a pause and the insertion of words of a different tone. Moreover, as we saw above, these words render the question nonsensical. We began the “conversation” prepared to participate in the illusion of a reasonably human-sounding question, but the slightly different tone and the inappropriate content of the inserted words immediately destroys the illusion and renders the question robotic, inhuman, a preposterous failure of communication.
3. In a more somber way, we might find this episode emblematic of a depressing loss of human contact. In genuine human communication, we expect a sensitivity and resilience based on context, but we find a loss of human understanding in this faux-conversational experience.
4. Depending on our feelings about technology and more generally our attitude towards uncertainty, we might react with irritation at being put into a nonsensical situation and being asked to choose from meaningless options. We might see in this situation an example of a broader problem of society’s attempt to automate that which is essentially and irreplaceably human.
5. We might feel a sense of wonder or curiosity about the precise workings of the system that produced this episode. We might mentally attempt to sketch a logical flow that could lead to such a result. While this sort of response may be more prevalent in those with an engineering or technical mindset, even minimally experienced computer users have a general awareness of underlying

code and computer protocols and how they affect our experiences; the simple act of invoking “view source” of a web page is enough to make us aware of this underlying dimension of digital media. This episode draws our attention to this underlying realm and encourages speculation about its contents.

6. Putting this experience into a larger context, we might consider it as one among a proliferation of messages that bombard us in digital culture. We receive messages from automated “voices” of banks telling us of credit card problems, as above; of the university telling us of inclement weather; of airlines warning us of flight delays; of computer systems telling us of impending password expirations. We receive messages from our friends telling us of their fleeting mood and passing whim at any given moment via tweet, blog, instant message, SMS, or email. New gadgets and applications emerge rapidly and promise to supply us with ever more communication channels.

The notion of information glut is not new, and certainly these observations may seem patronizing or misanthropic when considered in light of any specific message. Often these avenues of communication provide important social connections and information sharing; we don’t scoff dismissively when we learn of a friend’s tragedy or grief, regardless of the communication channel. But when considered in totality, the idea that a frenzy of communication can somehow drain value from communication in general does seem consistent with experience: A certain weariness sets in.

2.1.2 Two Dimensions

At a broad level, I believe these points illustrate a central characteristic of our experience with digital media: an alternating awareness of depth and surface. On the surface, we experience perceptible phenomena of words, images, sounds. Sometimes these elements of the surface may threaten to become overwhelming as they multiply

and proliferate, as in point 6 above; this frenzy of communication may distract us, exhaust us, and perhaps drain the meaning from our communications.

On the other hand, we also retain an awareness of an underlying code that governs these surface effects, as in point 5. Our consciousness is led towards the dimension underlying our experience, towards the depth of code responsible for the experience. This awareness may be activated by software errors or by inelegant programming, but I believe we are always more or less aware of this dimension. Depending on our personal inclinations, our appetite for exploration may be provoked, and we may feel an urge to plumb the depths of the code to determine how such phenomena may arise. This level, in contrast to that of the surface, seems to offer us an opportunity to get to the bottom of things and to grasp them at a fundamental level.

In a case such as the one mentioned above, both of these dimensions hint at a specter of meaninglessness that hovers over the experience. We may feel meaning being drained away in the frenzy of the surface; and even if we are able to plumb the digital depths of software and protocol to reach a more definitive understanding of the mechanism, we may be left with a lingering sense of emptiness and a lingering desire for a different sort of meaning. I believe both dimensions will be important to our discussion of absurdity and of the digital absurd.

Of course, ideas of surface and depth are anything but new. We need look only to Platonic forms to see an ancient example. But digital experience seems to offer a different perspective on these ideas, and the idea of the digital absurd aims to elaborate how these two dimensions are experienced in our current media and technology environment.

2.2 Turning to Camus

In our episodes of discomfort we have seen how digital experience may provoke a wide range of feelings. The glimmers of humor and despair, of delight and frustration, of

social connection and exhaustion of communication create a complex tapestry of feelings.

As mentioned in the introduction, the experience of the ancient condemned man Boethius suggests the idea of turning to philosophy for consolation in the face of crisis. Like Boethius, I hope to gather intellectual perspectives that could help address or at least understand our digital discomfort. These intellectual perspectives will form a backdrop for later examination of the more concrete practices of specific works of the literary and dramatic absurd, and later they will serve as the foundation for a theory of the digital absurd.

Unlike Boethius' experience, however, it seems unlikely that a single philosophy or source can serve as our Athena. The feelings aroused by our episodes of discomfort seem to call for a varied intellectual perspective. But the ideas of Albert Camus seem to provide a useful starting point, since he has written most extensively about the concept of the absurd, which includes concepts relevant to at least some of the feelings we have discussed. I believe Camus' philosophy of the absurd can provide us with a substantial foundation for our discussion of the absurd.

As elaborated in his book *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus' view of the absurd is complex, dealing not only with feelings of despair but also with a kind of pleasure and creativity arising amidst this despair. This duality seems quite valuable and, I believe, distinguishes Camus from other philosophers we might consider: A philosophy focused solely on despair would address some of the feelings we have seen but would seem unable to account for the playfulness or humor that are also part of the digital experience. From Camus we will examine not only his ideas of how the absurd sensibility can arise through repetitive or alienating experiences of everyday life, but we will also examine how the idea of the absurd might, somewhat perversely, inspire humor, play, creativity, and a motivation for exploration and engagement with the world.

Despite the usefulness of Camus' ideas of the absurd, I do not intend a wholesale appropriation of his philosophy, simply grafting it onto the digital. I will explore the relevance of certain of his ideas, but there are also missing elements in his conception of the absurd. Humor, for example, seems an important component of the absurd, but Camus deals very little with humor. (Some, in fact, may view his thought as exemplary of a certain depressed or humorless post-war sensibility of the 1950s and 1960s. From our ironic contemporary perspective, we might find a certain humor in Camus – perhaps as a sort of retrospective parody of post-war angst – but Camus himself says very little of the subject.) So I believe contributions from other streams of thought will be necessary to explore this aspect of the absurd. But first let us consider Camus' thought in some detail.

2.2.1 Camus' Idea of the Absurd Amidst the Everyday

For Camus, the absurd arises at the most fundamental level from a rift between human and world; in his view, there is a core human appetite for metaphysical explanation, and the world stubbornly refuses to satisfy this appetite. In other words, the absurd begins in longing for a clear and unified explanation of the world. Everyday experience and routines can paper over this longing, but sooner or later we confront our need for explanation, often suddenly and in the most prosaic of situations. In Camus' words, "in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. . . This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity" (Camus, *Myth*, 26). The human heart houses a "wild longing for clarity," but the world does not offer and will never offer sufficient clarity to satisfy this longing (Camus, *Myth*, 21). We see in this statement the importance of emotional response, of Camus' feelings resulting from a confrontation with the world. We also begin to detect some similarity to our episodes of digital discomfort, which were rooted in emotional responses to everyday interactions with digital media.

As noted above, we might conceive of the absurd as a type of depressed, negative thinking irrelevant to current intellectual trends. Perhaps contemporary thinking has simply evolved beyond these pessimistic views. But even if we concede that Camus' thought is somewhat representative of an earlier era, I believe we can identify some aspects of it that help us begin to draw an association between the absurd and the digital. In particular, Camus' descriptions of how the absurd sensibility arises within everyday modern life seem potentially fruitful; much of his initial effort is devoted to getting at the feeling of absurdity through practical description and analysis of the everyday. These points will help us build a bridge between abstract metaphysical thought and our digital experiences, which certainly often seem quintessentially practical and humdrum.

Camus points to several aspects of experience that can initiate the absurd sensibility:

1. The Everyday

For Camus, the absurd arises not necessarily after long contemplation of abstruse theoretical argumentation but rather among the prosaic situations of everyday living. Camus notes "the ridiculous character of living, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering" (Camus, *Myth*, 6). This may afford a basic starting point for our consideration of the absurd's relation to the digital, as many digital interactions may seem rather prosaic in character; we check email incessantly, scan news sites for tidbits of information, and tweet and post up-to-the-minute status reports.

2. Mechanical Repetition and Prosaic Routine

Camus suggests that the repetitive quality of modern life conceals an underlying poverty of meaning; when we question this surface repetition we are led to an

awareness of the absurd. Camus writes:

It happens that the stage sets collapse. Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the ‘why’ arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement . . . Weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness (Camus, *Myth*, 12).

Here we see an early indication of the dual valuation the Camus places on the absurd sensibility: While it may begin with apparent negativity and exhaustion, it can lead to awareness or consciousness. This begins to distinguish Camus’ thought from nihilism and negative varieties of existentialism.

3. Awareness of Time and Mortality

Like mechanical repetition, for Camus the passage of time may conceal our awareness of the absurd; when we gain an awareness of this we are exposed to an aspect of the absurd. Without reflection, Camus writes, time carries us along in the flow of a river of unawareness, and yet we may suddenly become aware of the absurd at any moment:

But a moment always comes when we have to carry it. We live on the future: ‘tomorrow,’ ‘later on,’ ‘when you have made your way,’ ‘you will understand when you are old enough’ . . . Yet a day comes when a man notices or says that he is thirty. Thus he asserts his youth. But simultaneously he situates himself in relation to time. He takes his place in it. He admits that he stands at a certain point on a curve that he acknowledges having to travel to its end (Camus, *Myth*, 13).

With this we see the awareness of death that plays such an essential role in his thinking; it is a theme to which he frequently returns. “Everyone acts as if no one ‘knew’,” he says, suggesting incredulity with others’ seeming disregard for their impending mortality and consignment to oblivion.

4. Contemplation of nature

Camus suggests that contemplation of the simplest elements of nature can bring about an awareness of the absurd. “Perceiving that the world is ‘dense’, sensing to what degree a stone is foreign or irreducible to us, with what intensity nature or a landscape can negate us” (Camus, *Myth*, 14). Camus finds something “inhuman” underneath the surface beauty of nature, and this inhumanity distances nature from us, contributing to the rift at the heart of the absurd.

In this respect Camus shares significantly with Sartre and other exponents of existentialist thought. In a famous passage from *Nausea*, Sartre reflects extensively on alienation resulting from the contemplation of the root of a chestnut tree:

...faced with this great wrinkled paw, neither ignorance nor knowledge was important: the world of explanations and reasons is not the world of existence. A circle is not absurd, it is clearly explained by the rotation of a straight segment around one of its extremities. But neither does a circle exist. This root, on the other hand, existed in such a way that I could not explain it. Knotty, inert, nameless, it fascinated me, filled my eyes, brought me back unceasingly to its own existence. In vain to repeat: “This is a root” – it didn’t work any more. I saw clearly that you could not pass from its function as a root, as a breathing pump, to that, to this hard and compact skin of a sea lion, to this oily, callous headstrong look. The function explained

nothing: it allowed you to understand generally that it was a root, but not that one at all. This root, with its color, shape, its congealed movement, was . . . below all explanation (Sartre, *Nausea*, 129).

Here lie ideas that are important to ideas both of absurdity and existentialism. They include the notion of an irreconcilable rift between man and world, of a reality which language attempts in vain to capture, of deep meaning remaining inaccessible to humankind, and of a longing for explanation as opposed to description. (Of course, while absurdist and existentialist thought share some commonality, it is important to note that they are not synonymous; we will see other differences as our discussion progresses.)

5. Other People

For Camus, observation of other people can lead to a feeling of detachment and the absurd:

Men, too, secrete the inhuman. At certain moments of lucidity, the mechanical aspects of their gestures, their meaningless pantomime makes silly everything that surrounds them. A man is talking on the telephone behind a glass partition; you cannot hear him, but you see his incomprehensible dumb show; you wonder why he is alive. (Camus, *Myth*, 14)

This sentiment seems uncharacteristically misanthropic compared to the rest of Camus' generally humanistic and sympathetic views. I consider his ideas as founded in a sympathetic concern for human discomfort while grappling with issues of meaning in human life; he recognizes the common human desire for meaning and resolution, even if he recognizes that neither his theory nor anything else can provide it.

6. The Ephemeral

While Camus does not specifically discuss the ephemeral as bringing about an awareness of the absurd, the idea seems implicit in his thinking. From his explicit points about the brevity of life and the absence of hope for eternal and satisfying explanation of existence, we come to see ideas, lives, and things all as ephemeral phenomena of reduced importance when considered alongside the issues Camus raises.

Taken together, these practical observations of everyday experience will prove useful to us as we develop a picture of the absurd and as we consider the absurd from other perspectives.

Some of these observations are readily extensible to other varieties of absurd thought, as well as into the digital realm. One can easily connect ideas of the prosaic, repetition, time, and the ephemeral to digital experiences. Like Sartre's reflection on the chestnut root, certain experiences may lead us to a sudden and uncomfortable awareness of the nature of the digital; as we saw in our episodes of digital discomfort, imperfections, repetition, or proliferation may serve as slight tears in the fabric of the digital, leading us to a different awareness as we unravel the thread.

To restate Camus' observations in this light: Our mechanical focus on everyday routine suspends us in repetitive experiences on the surface of existence; below this surface, where Camus would like to find definitive metaphysical explanation, is a disturbing absence. We can become aware of this underlying absence in our contemplation of nature, as we become aware that its depth is resistant to our attempts to understand it. Our existence is characterized by ephemeral experiences undergirded by no permanent truths or promise of enduring existence. Awareness of ever-impending death, and the threat of confrontation with ultimate oblivion press into our consciousness an awareness of the absurd.

2.2.2 Camus' Idea of the Absurd on the Intellectual Plane

Faced with the various discomforts of experience noted above, Camus considers seeking comfort in the resolution and simplicity of pure reason. But in Camus' thinking, reason cannot satisfy our need for metaphysical explanation and cannot provide a calming or satisfying unity of thought. He reviews reason's inability to provide such resolution, focusing on two areas:

2.2.2.1 *Logical Contradiction Involved in Self-Reflection*

Camus notes that logical contradiction appears "as soon as thought reflects on itself", citing an example from Aristotle. If we assert that "all statements are true", we also assert the truth of the contrary statement ("all statements are false"), which contradicts our original assertion. If we say that "all statements are false", we undermine the truth of our very assertion. Camus offers these contradictory situations as a first example of pure reason's inability to provide a complete and satisfying basis of unity; he seems to suggest that reason becomes tangled in contradiction in its most elementary attempts (Camus, *Myth*, 16).¹

2.2.2.2 *Inadequacy of Scientific Rationalism*

For Camus, scientific rationalism also fails to provide a satisfying foundation or explanation of the world. An often-cited passage gives an idea of his view of science:

Yet all the knowledge on earth will give me nothing to assure me that
this world is mine. You describe it to me and you teach me to classify

¹The existence of such self-contradictory statements may at first seem mere linguistic trickery, and indeed into the 1930s some schools of thought such as logical positivism dismissed them as improper uses of language. It is interesting to note, though Camus does not include it in his discussion, that these kinds of statements formed a part of the intellectual backdrop for Kurt Goedel's development of his incompleteness theorem, which holds that the system of mathematics, once thought to provide an example of a self-contained system of reason, in fact is not complete; that is, all statements cannot be proven within the confines of the system itself. This sort of thinking seems consistent with Camus' point that logical reasoning itself cannot provide a basis to satisfy the human desire for singular, satisfying explanation.

it. You enumerate its laws and in my thirst for knowledge I admit that they are true. You take apart its mechanism and my hope increases. At the final stage you teach me that this wondrous and multicolored universe can be reduced to the atom and that the atom itself can be reduced to the electron. All this is good and I wait for you to continue. But you tell me of an invisible planetary system in which electrons gravitate around a nucleus. You explain this world to me with an image. I realize then that you have been reduced to poetry: I shall never know. Have I the time to become indignant? You have already changed theories. So that science that was to teach me everything ends up in a hypothesis, that lucidity founders in metaphor, that uncertainty is resolved in a work of art. What need had I of so many efforts? The soft lines of these hills and the hand of evening on this troubled heart teach me much more. I have returned to my beginning. I realize that if through science I can seize phenomena and enumerate them, I cannot, for all that, apprehend the world (Camus, *Myth*, 19-20).

In other words, no matter how far it descends into mechanistic description, science is unable to reach a satisfying bedrock of explanation and thus represents something of a false hope; it leaves us unable to reconcile the rift between human and world or to explain the world:

We must despair of ever reconstructing the familiar, calm surface which would give us peace of heart... Between the certainty I have of my existence and the content I try to give that assurance, the gap will never be filled. Forever shall I be a stranger to myself. In psychology as in logic, there are truths but no truth (Camus, *Myth*, 19).

One must be careful not to draw too sweeping a connection between Camus and digital media, but at this point we might risk a tentative comparison between Camus' perspective on scientific rationalism and some aspects of the digital. Activities such as software development or deep technical troubleshooting can involve practices that feel something like Camus' mock conversation with a scientist. We may seek to understand a complicated software problem by repeatedly descending to more fundamental levels of code or protocol: we inspect program output, insert debugging statements in program flow, trace processes to inspect interaction with the operating system, analyze network protocols, and more; we "take apart its mechanism." As we inspect continually deeper levels we learn something more and increase our sense of mastery and insight. Yet at the same time we may be left with a feeling of emptiness, whether or not we have found the particularly evasive detail we sought. It is as if our spirit expects to find great truth in such seemingly great depth, but instead finds only increasing detail and a receding hope of grasping a more fundamental understanding of experience.

2.2.3 The Absurd Among Other Philosophical Perspectives

As we have seen, Camus' concept of the absurd relates fundamentally to notions of transcendent meaning as they have evolved over the course of millenia. Thus the absurd is intimately associated with religious and rationalist thought and with their responses to human grasping for meaning. With the decline of religion and the rise of rationalism, responses such as existentialism, phenomenology, and postmodern plurality also provide us with useful comparisons. I do not intend an exhaustive treatment of the history of religious and rationalist thought vis-à-vis absurd philosophy, but a brief sketch of these ideas will suffice here to situate the absurd within a broader context.

The confrontation between religion and rational thought leads us most naturally

to Cartesian dualism to start this overview. In his *Discourse on Method*, Descartes attempted to partition the world into physical and spiritual realms, thus allowing a sort of detente between the rational and religious worlds by delineating separate, non-competing spheres of authority. Religious thought could remain supreme in matters of metaphysical truth, while rationalist thought could attempt to explain the physical world without risking heresy.

Though pragmatically useful, many have noted the intellectual weakness of the Cartesian partition. Despite the obvious relation between mind and body, Descartes failed to explain convincingly exactly how the two are connected (beyond some speculation on the role of the pineal gland). Among others, philosopher John Searle has noted the weakness of Descartes' partition of mind and body:

We know that if somebody steps on my toe, I feel a pain even though his stepping on my toe is a physical event in the physical world, and my feeling of pain is a mental event that occurs inside my soul. How can such things happen? Just as bad: it seems there are causal relations going the other way as well: I decide to raise my arm, and, lo and behold, my arm goes up. How are we supposed to think that such a thing could ever happen? How can a decision in my soul cause a movement of a physical object in the world such as my body (Searle, *Mind*, 17)?

In the aftermath of Descartes' weak explanation are centuries of intellectual argument over the mind/body divide. Perhaps this unending struggle is itself evidence of the human desire for a unified and all-encompassing explanation of human existence, as Camus suggests. In any event, philosophical thought since Descartes has struggled for such reconciliation and has included many different positions. Broadly, these positions can be separated according to their acceptance or rejection of the idea of metaphysical transcendence. Transcendent thought accepts the notion of some underlying organizing aspect to human existence that is not accessible through sensory

perception. The transcendent exists prior to the material world and provides meaning and purpose to human existence.

Different philosophical perspectives locate the source of transcendence differently. In tracing the development of absurd philosophy, Camus follows thinkers who pursue various perspectives on the idea of transcendence and assert different sources. Of those who argue for it, reason and religion vie for primacy as the source of transcendence. The following crude summary of these perspectives will help contextualize Camus' absurdist philosophy.

Those who embrace religion as the source of transcendence accept the notion of a deity that provides ultimate meaning to human existence. Soren Kierkegaard expresses this religious view of transcendence in his book *Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard argues that humans cannot possibly fully understand deity, but it is this very failure that provides Kierkegaard with the assurance of his views, in a sort of paradox: Starting with a hope of understanding God, he ultimately concedes his inability to understand or access the transcendent – but he takes this failure as proof of God's existence. Another religious existentialist, Karl Jaspers, summarizes this view: “Does not that failure reveal, beyond any possible explanation and interpretation, not the absence but the existence of transcendence?” (Camus, *Myth*, 32-33) This strain of thought, then, acknowledges the existence of a rift between human and world but then, paradoxically, uses that rift in a redemptive move towards religious faith and ultimate unity. In other words, such thinkers choose to close the rift between human and world by resorting to a “leap of faith” towards the religious.

Camus simply cannot embrace this thinking, describing it as “philosophical suicide.” For Camus, this move simply wishes away the fundamental rift between human and world at the heart of his philosophy. Camus insists that we must preserve the divorce between human and world, which he regards as the truest and most basic aspect of our experience: Denying it amounts to denying a fundamental truth. We

must instead recognize the tension and the struggle, making it an ever-present part of our consciousness and thus living in a state of lucidity, a constant awareness of the unsettled question of existence. For Camus, this lucid struggle may be uncomfortable, but there is no other intellectually honest alternative: “It is a matter of living in that state of the absurd – this mind and that world straining against each other without being able to embrace” (Camus, *Myth*, 40).

Phenomenology offers another point of comparison with absurdist thought. Like religious existentialists, phenomenologists accept the possibility of a transcendence that cannot be explained through reason alone. Rather than a leap of faith, though, they attempt to access transcendent truth through a sort of meditative practice called the phenomenological reduction. The reduction aims to suppress rationalist assumptions and psychological preconceptions in order to allow a reflective inquiring back into consciousness, and this ultimately might allow access to metaphysical truth.

Our aim is not to explore the phenomenological reduction in depth but rather to understand it from the perspective of Camus and the absurd. Camus endorses the starting point of phenomenology, which he describes as a “modesty of thought that limits itself to describing what it cannot explain.” In other words, Camus appreciates the skepticism with which phenomenology begins and its doubt as to whether transcendence can be accessed through grand schemes of reasoning. Instead, the phenomenologist begins with a purification of experience, the notion that “thought can still take delight in describing every aspect of experience” (Camus, *Myth*, 43). Through this approach the phenomenologist hopes somehow to achieve a more direct access to the world, bypassing preconceptions of rational thought.

Comfortable with the beginning of phenomenology’s voyage, Camus becomes uncomfortable as it approaches its final destination. When phenomenology, through its practice of reduction, claims the ability to discover the ‘essence’ of objects, Camus senses a different sort of philosophical suicide. Where religious existentialists

through a leap of faith arrive at transcendence in the form of a deity, Camus thinks phenomenology simply offers a different sort of deity: “There is no longer a single idea explaining everything, but an infinite number of essences giving meaning to an infinite number of objects.” Camus cannot subscribe to this move, which restores to the universe a depth in which he would like to believe, but simply cannot: “The world has ceased to have its reflection in a higher universe, but the heaven of forms is figured in the host of images on earth” (Camus, *Myth*, 47).

We begin to sense the maddening limbo in which Camus feels himself trapped, on the one hand wanting to believe in the existence of a transcendent idea that could unify the bizarre experience of the world, but on the other hand feeling too intellectually honest to accept the explanations offered. He seeks depth but cannot accept any attempt to provide a foundation for such depth. In describing this limbo, Camus says “for the absurd man, the world is neither so rational nor so irrational” (Camus, *Myth*, 49). This seems one of the most fundamental aspects of the absurd, and one that separates it from other perspectives such as nihilism or superstition. The absurd recognizes the human, emotional desire for a something-beyond and yet is also bound by the human expectation of rational explanation. The absurd man is tempted to take the leap, but he does not want to do anything that he does not fully understand.

2.2.4 Consequences of Absurd Thought

Camus acknowledges that there is little new in his discussion and critique of religious and rational approaches through the centuries. It is in his attempt to derive a set of consequences of absurd man’s predicament that his thought seems to differentiate itself from other thinkers. His primary question is whether it is possible to live “without hope” – without resorting to the various sorts of philosophical suicide previously outlined. Camus derives three consequences of the absurd sensibility: revolt, freedom,

and passion.

1. Revolt

By revolt, Camus suggests a sort of protest against the “philosophical suicides” explored earlier; as we saw, for Camus philosophical suicide represents an abandonment of the essential tension or chasm between world and human. Revolt, in contrast, involves a refusal to foreclose this tension but rather to prize it as a source of lucidity and of life: For Camus, “living is keeping the absurd alive. Keeping it alive is, above all, contemplating it” (Camus, *Myth*, 54). In other words, Camus asks that we retain our lucidity and awareness of the absurd condition and thus engage in revolt against traditional responses to existential discomfort.

2. Freedom

Because radically different discourses lay claim to the concept of freedom, Camus takes care to specify the sense of freedom he believes is a second consequence of the absurd. He emphasizes freedom of thought and action, not a metaphysical freedom the foundation of which would be found in a deity. The latter sense of freedom might be thought of as “freedom from worry” or from metaphysical angst; the former sense that stems from absurd living involves instead a freedom from the strictures that would be found in transcendent explanation. This aspect of Camus’ thought reminds one of the odd paradox we saw with Kierkegaard: Camus begins with a longing for a unified explanation of existence, but in the absence (or the impossibility) of such explanation, he accepts that the unfortunate situation can redound to confer a certain positive benefit, that of freedom of action and thought, unbound by a confining transcendent truth.

To some extent, Camus explains the tension between his desire for transcendence

and the sense of freedom he obtains from its unavailability as follows:

I cannot get lost in the glorification or the mere definition of a notion which eludes me and loses its meaning as soon as it goes beyond the frame of reference of my individual experience. I cannot understand the kind of freedom that would be given me by a higher being. I have lost the sense of hierarchy. The only conception of freedom I can have is that of the prisoner of the individual in the midst of the State. The only one I know is freedom of thought and action. Now if the absurd cancels all my chances of eternal freedom, it restores and magnifies, on the other hand, my freedom of action (Camus, *Myth*, 56).

The absurd man wants freedom from metaphysical worry, but such freedom is simply unavailable in human experience; in this failed desire we find instead a different sort of freedom, one of thought and action.

3. Passion

From these first consequences, Camus suggests a third, perhaps more controversial consequence: passion. By it Camus seems to embrace the notion of satisfaction through sheer volume of experience; in his words, “belief in the absurd is tantamount to substituting the quantity of experiences for the quality... What counts is not the best living but the most living” (Camus, *Myth*, 60).

At first glance, this seems a somewhat unusual idea, and perhaps not in keeping with Camus’ generally restrained thought. In his elaboration of the idea, it becomes clear that he means not to imply the sort of frenzy we might envision if we interpret his words too literally: We might paint a picture of the absurd human rushing about town, indiscriminately attempting to see and experience all that is available, perhaps without regard for ethics or responsibility. Instead

it seems that Camus wants primarily to emphasize that lucidity drives us to a fuller dimension of experience not available to the non-lucid person. Still, the concept of passion does seem to mean more than a mere restatement of the concept of lucidity; one cannot help interpret Camus' words to mean a certain slipping-off of traditional constraints to allow more, and more varied, experience. His characterization of passion as "first and foremost being faced with the world as often as possible" and "expending oneself through experience" certainly do impart a hint of unrestrained if not irresponsible actions.

To illustrate these consequences, Camus offers several absurd figures, or characters with qualities that demonstrate the notions of revolt, freedom, and passion. In the figure of Don Juan, Camus finds one who rejects the notion of a single, monumental love for a multiplicity of loves; Don Juan revolts against the societal injunction that one must find satisfaction in one all-encompassing love and instead pursues the freedom of many loves and passions. In this sense, Don Juan follows absurd consequences and "multiplies what he cannot unify." The actor, a second absurd figure, also embodies a sense of absurdity in his quest for a multiplicity of experiences; "entering into all those lives, experiencing them in their diversity, amounts to acting them out", Camus says. While Camus' examples do suggest a hint of promiscuity, the broader idea is of a person who, without recourse to transcendent truth to structure and guide a lifetime of thinking and experience, pursues different, and multiple, paths; the absurd man is one "who wants to achieve everything and live everything, that useless attempt, that ineffectual persistence" (Camus, *Myth*, 82).

From these absurd figures, Camus extrapolates and speculates on a certain kind of creativity he calls "absurd creation": unlike traditional views of artistic creation, absurd creativity pursues quantity rather than quality, variety rather than singularity, fever rather than calm, the ephemeral rather than the timeless, surface rather than deep meaning. As one example of absurd creation, Camus mentions Proust's "groping,

anxious quest,” his meticulous collecting of flowers, of wallpapers, and of anxieties [that] signifies nothing else.” The absurd creator understands the unavailability of a unified explanation of the world and thus declines to reflect it in art; she knows that “explanation is useless, but the sensation remains and, with it, the constant attractions of a universe inexhaustible in quantity” (Camus, *Myth*, 95). It is this inexhaustibility and disunity that the absurd creator seeks to reflect in her work.

We thus see that Camus arrives at a perspective that prizes not depth, but diversity. Beginning from a perspective that focused on a sense of underlying absence, the absurd person learns to take a certain pleasure in the disunity and proliferation engendered by this absence: “The heart learns thus that the emotion delighting us when we see the world’s aspects comes to us not from its depth but from their diversity” (Camus, *Myth*, 95). Yet it would be wrong to forget the importance of depth within absurd thought amidst this celebration of diversity and variety. (Indeed, I believe the deep-rooted nostalgia for unity provides one of the keys that makes absurdism more interesting than a garden-variety post-modern sensibility; it provides a bivalent sensibility that may help us interpret the feelings we encounter in our relations with the digital.)

Further, it is important to note that absurdism never claims to overcome through creation its founding problem, the rift between human and world; it only claims to reflect this issue for the artist/creator and his audience. We can perhaps see here a difference between absurdist thought and existential thought. Both would start with a sense of confusion or despondency in the face of an apparently meaningless world, but the existentialist would theorize the creation of meaning and value through choice and action, even if none are given a priori. Absurdist thought, on the other hand, is colored more by a sense of futility and resignation, along with an almost involuntary drive to create artifacts that reflect a hopeless search. The absurd creator does not claim to resolve the problem of meaning and value with creations of fixed, lasting

meaning; rather he seeks through his work to play on the irreconcilable rift and thus imbue a sense of crisis: The artist “will not yield to the temptation of adding to what is described a deeper meaning that it knows to be illegitimate.” In this way, absurd creation “does not offer an escape for the intellectual ailment. Rather, it is one of the symptoms of that ailment...” (Camus, *Myth*, 95).

In other words, the absurd work does not pretend to provide access to a deep level of meaning; the absurdist would like such meaning to exist but has profound doubts about its existence or accessibility. Instead she seeks, unpretentiously and provisionally, only to describe:

There is a certain relationship between the global experience of the artist and the work that reflects that experience... That relationship is bad when the work aims to give the whole experience in the lace paper of an explanatory literature. That relationship is good when the work is but a piece cut out of experience, a facet of the diamond in which the inner luster is epitomized without being limited. In the first case there is overloading and pretension to the eternal. In the second, a fecund work because of a whole implied experience, the wealth of which is suspected... If the world were clear, art would not exist (Camus, *Myth*, 98).

We see in this view the relation between the ephemeral and the absurd: insofar as the absurd involves a questioning or doubting of ideas with a claim to the eternal, absurd creation responds by consciously embracing the ephemeral. For Camus, this means

to work and create ‘for nothing’, to sculpture in clay, to know that one’s creation has no future, to see one’s work destroyed in a day while being aware that fundamentally this has no more importance than building for centuries – this is the difficult wisdom that absurd thought sanctions.

Performing these two tasks simultaneously, negating on the one hand and magnifying on the other, is the way open to the absurd creator(Camus, *Myth*, 114).

2.2.5 Summary of Camus

With this collection of ideas, we can now see a partial picture of the absurd. As we saw, the absurd begins in crisis, where the discomforts of everyday experience can lead one to question the undergirding or depth of human existence. The absurd person longs for a satisfying, unified explanation of existence but cannot accept those that have been suggested: Rationalism leaves him cold, but he cannot with intellectual honesty accept the leap of faith he sees in religion. (We also guess that his longing for unity would leave him dissatisfied with postmodern diversity.) He simply resigns himself to accept the unavailability of a satisfying explanation of the world, the impossibility of a bridge between human and world, and thus a perpetual discomfort. From this, he derives a set of principles, including a taste for quantity of experience, a rapid and ephemeral brand of experience and creation. In revolt, the absurd person embraces the surface while recognizing the impossibility of satisfying his thirst for depth.

Returning to our episodes of discomfort, we may find that Camus' absurdist philosophy can help us begin to sort out our complex feelings. We recall some of the factors that Camus suggests can lead us to an awareness of the absurd: mechanical repetition, the ephemeral, and contemplation of the everyday. We can see some obvious connections with the phone call of our initial example: We might liken the imperfection of Citibank's Fraud Early Alert automated phone call to one of the situations of automation that provoke Camus' existential crisis. For Camus, the mechanical aspect of everyday life served as one factor in the "collapse of the stage

sets” that exposed the emptiness underlying human existence; perhaps the nonsensical phone call creates a similar sense of underlying meaninglessness. Additionally, the phone call may serve as a reminder of the larger category of fleeting or ephemeral communications with which we are bombarded each day.

But the more valuable lesson we take from Camus’ thought seems to lie in its bivalent sensibility. We can certainly criticize contemporary culture and digital culture on many grounds, including objection to mechanization, loss of human contact, distancing from nature, detachment amidst a frenzy of communication, and so forth. I believe there is a disturbing or uncomfortable side to these trends, and part of Camus’ thought reflects this. But on the other hand, rather than limiting his thinking to this aspect, he also attempts to formulate a new viewpoint from these observations. The Camus that decries the mechanized, preposterous phone call and suggests that it creates an awareness of a generalized absurd condition is the same Camus that comes to embrace this condition and find in it principles for living, even in a compromised and ungrounded existence. With Camus, we admit our inability to reach a satisfying and all-encompassing truth, a unifying force, and instead revel in the variety, quantity, and fleeting nature of our experiences. Yet the initial feeling of ungroundedness stays with us, putting us into a bivalent frame of mind: We revel in the ephemeral of the surface while retaining awareness of our questioning of the depth.

We leave Camus thinking of him as he thought of the mythical character Sisyphus – happy in his lucidity. For his defiance of the gods, Sisyphus was condemned to push a boulder up a hill, only to have it fall down and require him to repeat the task eternally. Confronted with this unending and pointless task, Sisyphus embraces his awareness of his absurd situation.

But for all the usefulness of Camus’ perspective of the absurd, it lacks what seems an essential ingredient for a broad discussion of the absurd – humor. We saw in our initial episodes an element of the comic, and humor will play an important role in our

later consideration of the literature and drama of the absurd. So we must consider additional views to broaden our perspective.

The artist's statement of digital media designer and programmer Jeff Crouse may help us understand the element of humor which exists alongside more somber notions of the absurd:

I love the absurdity of technology. It's fascinating to me how completely we adopt things that are so unnatural and awkward. Technology can be alienating, anti-social, violent, and stupid, and we still want it bigger, louder, more mind-numbing. This is what I like to focus on in my work. My parodies invite people to make fun of themselves by engaging with familiar technology, but tweaked – sometimes only slightly – to make it absurd.

Normally this would make me just another schmuck decrying how Facebook is ruining civilization, except that I love it all. I sign up for every single new Web 2.0 site that hits my inbox, I am a total gadget whore, and my attention span is intimately linked to the maximum allowed video length on YouTube. My parodies are tributes to the absurdity (Crouse, website).

To supplement our views of the absurd with humor and other important components, we turn to two other thinkers.

2.3 John Allen Paulos and the Humor of Rift

Working from Camus' notion of an unbridgeable gap between human and world, perhaps we can build an understanding of a humor that accompanies the discomfort surrounding this gap. John Allen Paulos' book *Mathematics and Humor* grapples with the question of humor in a way that may prove useful. In attempting to develop

his idea, Paulos summarizes several views of humor through history, a few of which I repeat here.

Scottish poet and philosopher James Beattie wrote that “laughter arises from the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous circumstances, considered as united in complex object or assemblage, or as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them.” English writer and philosopher William Hazlitt reinforces the notion of humor based on incongruity, suggesting that “the essence of the laughable is the incongruous, the disconnecting of one idea from another, or the jostling of one feeling against another.” To these views, Schopenhauer adds an element of sudden realization: Incongruity is one ingredient, but another factor of humor is the suddenness with which we come to understand the incongruity. He writes, “Humor often occurs in this way: two or more real objects are thought through one concept; it then becomes strikingly apparent from the entire difference of the objects in other respects, that the concept was only applicable to them from a one-sided point of view” (Paulos, *Mathematics and Humor*, 3).

Narrowing the concept of incongruity, Baudelaire suggests that humor can derive from a particular kind of incongruity based on the nature of humanity and the realization that we are both physical and spiritual creatures, that we have a sense of both the ridiculous and the sublime. Laughter, in his words,

is the consequence in man of the idea of his own superiority. And since laughter is essentially human, it is, in fact, essentially contradictory; that is to say that it is at once a token of an infinite grandeur and an infinite misery – the latter in relation to the absolute Being of whom man has an inkling, the former in relation to the beasts. It is from the perpetual collision of these two infinities that laughter is struck. The comic and the capacity for laughter are situated in the laugher and by no means the

object of the laughter (Paulos, *Mathematics and Humor*, 5).

Adding a more specific facet to the humor of disparity between human and world, Henri Bergson suggested a source of laughter in the idea of “the mechanical encrusted on something living” (Paulos, *Mathematics and Humor*, 5). That is, when man becomes rigid, machinelike, and repetitive he becomes laughable, since the essence of humanity is commonly thought to be in its flexibility and spirit.

In these views we can see something of Camus’ concern with disparity between world and human, but interpreted differently. Where Camus finds crisis in this disparity, Baudelaire and Bergson find potential for laughter. We begin to anticipate how these views, brought together in a broader notion of the absurd, might help us sort out the complex feelings of discomfort, play, and humor we saw earlier.

Of course, incongruity alone is not a sufficient condition for humor, and Paulos acknowledges several other important factors: Mere juxtaposition of two incongruous concepts does not suffice. The incongruity must be noticed, it must have a point, and the emotional climate must be right; that is, we must be in the right frame of mind to find humor in the incongruity. To return to our initial example of the Citibank phone call, the obvious computerized nature of the call leads us to expect a perfectly logical (and emotionally antiseptic) experience; the apparent error in programming makes us suddenly aware of the human capacity for error behind this mechanized surface. Depending on circumstances, one might as easily find irritation or despondency as humor in this situation, but this dual possibility seems consistent with an absurd sensibility.

While Paulos suggests incongruity as an essential feature of humor, this seems to overstate its importance; other situations such as psychological release or play may offer different sources of humor. Nonetheless, Paulos’ perspective on humor does offer a useful addendum to the philosophy of Camus and its emphasis on rift, helping to explain why the absurd may include both elements of humor and despair.

The bulk of Paulos' book involves the formulation of a theory of humor based on mathematical catastrophe theory, which involves the description and classification of discontinuities such as jumps, switches, and reversals. While the development of this theory is interesting, it is unnecessary to recount here; we include Paulos only for the suggestion of the element of humor amidst other elements of the absurd.

2.4 Baudrillard's Alternate Perspective on Meaning, Discomfort, and Pleasure

Jean Baudrillard's thinking offers another comparative perspective alongside Camus' concept of the absurd. While his work is not considered absurdist per se, his views of surface and depth and of literary and psychoanalytic meaning may help us understand the concept of the absurd through juxtaposition with Camus' ideas. Looking in the depth of the world for meaning, Camus finds discomfort in a lack of fixed, firm, and unified foundation; in contrast, Baudrillard questions the very premise of such a search, delivering this idea through a critique of twentieth-century linguistics and psychoanalysis.

Baudrillard's view will help us connect Camus' notions of transcendent meaning in the depth of the world with the more prosaic issue of finding meaning in the depth of language. This will be valuable to us as we attempt to connect Camusian desire for metaphysical truth with the realms of language, code, and digital media. In discussion of our episodes of digital discomfort, we suggested that they activated an impulse to find deeper levels of understanding through inspection or imagination of the underpinnings of code and media. As we saw, Camus' absurdist thought could be likened in some ways to this kind of thinking; Baudrillard's ideas too will be useful here, extending this thinking into the linguistic realm.

In "The Extermination of the Name of God," Baudrillard takes as a point of departure Saussure's early work on the anagram, which attempts to outline structural laws of the classical poetic forms of Saturnine, Vedic, and Germanic texts. Saussure

had posited a “law of coupling” that required a very specific structure of balance:

1. A vowel has no right to figure within the Saturnine unless it has its counter-vowel in some other place in the verse. The result of this is that if the verse has an even number of syllables, the vowels couple up exactly, and must always have a remainder of zero, with an even total of each type of vowel.
2. The law of consonants is identical, and no less strict: there is always an even number of any consonant whatsoever.
3. ...if there is an irreducible remainder either of vowels (unpaired verse) or consonants, then, contrary to what we might think, this does not escape condemnation even if it is a matter of a simple ‘e’: we will see it reappear in the following verse, as a new remainder corresponding to the overspill from the preceding one (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, 196).

A second law hypothesized by Saussure is the “law of the theme-word,” which suggests an underlying invocation of a proper name, a hidden signified disintegrated into its phonetic components and hidden beneath the manifest text. With this practice, Saussure suggests, “it is a matter of emphasizing a name or word, striving to repeat its syllables and thus giving it a second, artificial way of being, added, so to speak, to the original being of the word” (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, 196). Saussure takes examples from classical texts, such as:

TAURASIA CISAUNA SAMNIO CEPIT (here SCIPIO is the theme-word)

AASEN ARGALEON ANEMON AMEGARTOS AUTME (AGAMEMNON is the theme-word)

From these examples, Saussure wants to suggest that structural rules and certain kinds of repetition can impart a *secondary meaning* buried within language. Through

such techniques, language would operate in an alternate way from the standard notions of Saussurean signification. This alternate source of meaning, Saussure implies, might explain the power of poetic pleasure. Baudrillard notes Saussure's suggestion, based on these prospective laws, that the peculiar enjoyment of the poetic is that it "shatters the fundamental laws of the human word"; these laws, in the view of linguists, include the codified bond between signifier and signified and the linearity of signifiers.

In Baudrillard's view, Saussure relinquishes this idea too easily, discarding it when he found himself unable to find convincing proof. Baudrillard, however, does not give up so easily and wants to pursue this line of thought – but only to challenge it and make it an example of a kind of wrongheadedness where linguistic meaning is concerned. Baudrillard will use Saussure's abortive attempt at a theory of anagrammatic meaning to promote an alternate view that embraces the defiance of the standard notion of linguistic meaning, enjoys its destruction, and takes a certain pleasure in nothingness. It is this aspect that we want to explore in relation to the absurd, as it will offer a critical alternative to the view of Camus. Both theorists are concerned with issues of meaning (and the idea of meaning issuing from the depth of experience), but their ultimate views diverge significantly. Camus looks at the world and finds an underlying poverty of ultimate meaning, and he takes this as a starting point for an experimental practice of absurd creation, as we saw; Baudrillard looks at anagrammatic practice and finds meaning in the process of being destroyed, and it is this process of destruction that he suggests creates enjoyment. Camus' nostalgia for a unified explanation of the world indicates he would prefer access to some source of transcendent meaning, though it will never be available; Baudrillard, in contrast, rejects the idea of such "deep" explanations from the outset.

In taking this viewpoint, Baudrillard challenges alternate attempts from linguistics and psychoanalysis to explain poetic enjoyment of the anagram. He portrays these

fields as engaged in a desperate attempt to colonize the territory of the anagram and of the poetic in general, resorting to intellectual acrobatics to assert control over poetic enjoyment by viewing poetry within the established regime of meaning. We will not explore in great detail the mechanisms by which Baudrillard suggests this co-optation takes place, since a brief overview will suffice. Linguistics, for example, attempts to describe the poetic enjoyment associated with Saussure's laws of anagrams by attempting to attach meaning to structural practices of poetry that occur at the phonemic level. He offers as an example lines by Swinburne which feature a prominent alliteration on the letter *f*:

... the faint fresh flame of the young year flushes
from leaf to flower and flower to fruit ...

Mockingly, Baudrillard repeats a view from literary criticism that reflects (in his view) a desperate attempt at appropriation: "In Swinburne's lines', says Ivan Fonagy, 'we feel the breeze passing, without the poem expressly mentioning it.'" In other words, this account suggests that the repetition of sounds (the alliteration on *f*) invokes a signified (breeze) without an explicit signifier, accomplishing a communication of meaning through a structural mechanism alone. Such thinking attempts desperately to incorporate issues of structure into the established notion of signification. In a similar way, Baudrillard suggests that linguistics attempts to co-opt Saussure's second anagrammatic law, the theme-word, by viewing the latent name as a "secondary signified of a text that 'expresses' or 'represents' it, conjointly with the 'manifest' signified. . . ." In other words, linguistics again attempts to fit anagrammatic practice into its established signifier-signified theoretical framework. In these ways, Baudrillard thinks, linguistics is engaged in a "desperate attempt to save the law of

linguistic value and the essential categories of the mode of signification (signifier, signified, expression, representation, equivalence)...” (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, 198).

Baudrillard resists these views, arguing broadly against the insistence on creation of meaning as the central concern of poetry. On the contrary, he suggests that it is the cancellation or destruction of meaning that is important, that poetic enjoyment stems from the *extermination of value*. For example, in opposition to the idea of the theme-word constituting a latent name that reinforces a manifest signified (Scipio and Agamemnon, from above), Baudrillard focuses on the idea of destruction and its attendant enjoyment:

... the theme-word is diffracted throughout the text. In a way, it is ‘analysed’ by the verse or the poem, reduced to its simple elements, decomposed like the light spectrum, whose diffracted rays then sweep across the text... It is therefore a matter not of another manner of being the Same, of reiteration of paraphrase, of a clandestine avatar of the original name of God, but rather of an explosion, a dispersion, a dismembering where the name is annihilated.

The poetic is the restitution of symbolic exchange in the very heart of words. Where words, in the discourse of signification, finalized by meaning, do not respond to each other, do not speak to each other (and neither, within words themselves, do consonants, vowels, and syllables) in the poetic, on the contrary, once the authority of meaning has been broken, all the constitutive elements enter into exchange with, and start to respond to, each other... They are not ‘liberated’, nor is any deep or ‘unconscious’ content ‘set free’ through them: they are simply returned to exchange, and this very process is enjoyment (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, 199).

In other words, Baudrillard tells us that the poetic is a realm in which meaning is destroyed, and we should not attempt to recapture it through a linguistic, a psychoanalytic, or any other framework. This perspective may prove useful in our analysis of the absurd, if only as a counterpoint to the suggestion of depth offered by Camus. Instead of embracing the notion of searching for meaning in the depth of a text, or the universe, or the digital, Baudrillard asserts a concept of pleasure in the very destruction of meaning.

To risk another early foray into the realm of the digital, perhaps we can juxtapose this perspective with the one we suggested previously, where we attempted to understand a complicated software problem by repeatedly descending to more fundamental levels of code or protocol. In taking apart digital mechanism, we certainly increase our sense of mastery and insight. But we also suggested that this process can leave us with a feeling of emptiness, as if our spirit expects to find great truth in such seemingly great depth but instead finds only increasingly miniscule detail. Following Baudrillard, we can envision digital media (specifically language-oriented digital media) as consisting of an overt layer where linguistic meaning reigns, undergirded by a deeper layer of code or protocol where meaning is dissipated – and in this dissipation we find a certain subversive pleasure. Rather than considering code as a subterranean layer from which we would like to discover profound meaning (but ultimately cannot), perhaps we might instead view the process of descending into code as a pleasurable dismemberment of the manifest content.

2.4.1 Summarizing and Dismissing Proponents of the Regime of Signification

Baudrillard also considers a similar attempt of linguistics to explain anagrammatic enjoyment in terms of meaning: Linguist Jean Starobinski's *Words upon Words: The Anagrams of Ferdinand de Saussure*. Baudrillard suggests that Starobinski views poetry as a code that can be deciphered if only one knows the proper 'key'. In

this sense poetry becomes something of a cryptogram, an obfuscated message which contains in its depth a ‘plaintext’ message that provides closure and finalizes meaning for the cryptanalyst. Baudrillard summarizes and then dismisses this view of the poetic:

... behind a coherent or incoherent manifest text, there lies a latent text to be found. In both cases, there is a disengagement, a distantiation of the signified, of the last word of history, a detour by way of the signifier, *différance* as Derrida says. But in any case, it is possible, by whatever developments, to seize hold of the last word, the formula that controls the text. This formula may be unconscious ... but it is always coherent and discursive. With the dawning of this formula, the cycle of meaning is exhausted. And enjoyment, in every case, is proportionate to the detour, the delay, the loss of the statement, to the time lost in rediscovering it. It is therefore extremely restrained in society’s games, more intense in the *mot d’esprit*, where the decoding is suspended and where we laugh in proportion to the destruction of meaning. In the poetic, it is infinite, because no code whatsoever can be found there, no deciphering is possible, and because there is never a signified to put an end to the cycle. Here, the formula is not even unconscious, it does not exist. The key is definitively lost. This is the difference between simple cryptogrammatic pleasure ... and the symbolic radiation of the poem. In other words, if the poem refers to something, it is always to NOTHING (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, 209).

From a somewhat opposite point of view, Umberto Eco argues that the tension between signifier and signified can create multiple layers of signification. This differs from the cryptogrammatic notion of meaning, which implies the idea of a single key

which will unlock a text's definitive meaning. In Eco's conception, the interaction between signifier and signified produces not only a first, denotative phase of reference but also additional "harmonic" phases, giving rise to a "theoretically unlimited" chain reaction of meaning.

Of course, we can predict Baudrillard's dismissive response to Eco's suggestion of a surfeit of meaning. He prefers to focus on the movement *away from* signification – on a destructive force from which pleasure emanates. Of Eco he writes: "This theory serves as the basic ideology of everything we have been able to say about the poetic (nor does psychoanalysis escape this) – ambiguity, polysemia, polyvalence, polyphony of meaning: it is always a matter of the radiation of the signified, of a simultaneity of significations" (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, 217). Baudrillard rejects this insistence on dredging the depths of language for undiscovered examples of signification.

As for Baudrillard's critique of psychoanalytical perspective, it seems unnecessary to recount it here, since it follows the same lines of thinking: Though different in specific mechanisms, the critique is similar in its rejection of the dogma that there is positive meaning to be found the depths of psychological phenomena (dreams, jokes, slips of the tongue). In the end, Baudrillard questions the very foundation of linguistics and its reliance on the "Saussurean bar between signifier and signified [that] is essential to the linguistic, scientific understanding of poetry" (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, 222). Insofar as the psychoanalytic perspective draws on linguistic theory for its interpretive power, Baudrillard is bound to reject it too. He writes:

For the methodology of the separation of signifier and signified holds no better than the methodology of the separation of the mind and the body. The same imaginary in both cases. In the one case, psychoanalysis came to say what this was, as, in the other, did poetics. But there has basically never been any need for psychoanalysis nor for poetics: no one has ever

believed in them apart from the scholars and linguists themselves (just as, in the final analysis, no one has ever believed in economic determinism other than economic scientists and their Marxist critics) (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, 222).

Baudrillard finds in the linguistic and psychoanalytic interpretations of the poetic a residue of Western materialism in its insistence on value as a positive entity, in its treatment of words and meanings as *things*. He, on the other hand, advocates an opposite understanding of enjoyment in anagrams and in the poetic in general: “It is precisely because the poetic aims not at the production of signifieds, but at the exact consumption and cyclical resolution of a signifying material, that it takes on a limited corpus” (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, 204). In other words, the act of poetic production aims not at the production of linguistic or psychoanalytic signification but on the cancellation of value, the refusal to countenance a remainder in the process of poetic production.

The Western view of poetic enjoyment, Baudrillard asserts, “has to become the decipherable sign of an unsaid, of something that perhaps will never give up its code, but that thereby merely augments its value.” And this is because “Western thought cannot bear, and has at bottom never been able to bear, a void of signification, a non-place and non-value” (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, 234). In opposition to this Western view, Baudrillard argues for reclaiming a view of negative enjoyment:

There is no materialist reference in the symbolic operation, not even an ‘unconscious’ one; rather there is the operation of an ‘anti-matter’. We are wary of science fiction, but it is true that there is some analogy between a particle and an anti-particle, whose encounter would result in their mutual annihilation (along with, moreover, a fabulous energy), and the principle of the vowel and its counter-vowel in Saussure, or, in more general terms,

between any given signifier and the anagrammatic double that eliminates it (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, 236).

2.5 *Summary*

With the supplemental views of Paulos and Baudrillard, we are able to broaden Camus' perspective of the absurd to account for the complex experiences we discussed previously; this should provide a broad foundation for our continued exploration of the absurd. It is worth reviewing a point-by-point summary how these three thinkers help us assemble a philosophical platform from which to approach the absurd. From each we take specific ideas and attitudes that address part of the complex feeling of the absurd; as we saw in our episodes of digital discomfort, these feelings include:

- an awareness of algorithmic repetition that can be heightened by certain aspects of digital media, as with Ryan's game;
- an awareness of a subterranean level of code that can become foregrounded in certain situations, as in our *Notorious* example;
- a feeling of overwhelming proliferation of language and communication, as in our discussion of IM, Twitter, Flickr, etc;
- a feeling of fascination and playfulness at the Oulipian insertion of nonsignifying structures into works of literature, alongside a sense of inquisitiveness about the reasons for this fascination;
- a combination of frustration, loss, and humor in our conversation with Citibank's automated agent;
- questions of how such tendencies affect our experience of meaning when we interact with digital (or proto-digital) media.

We turned to philosophy, and specifically to Camus, for his focus on meaning and to determine whether the concept of the absurd might offer some larger framework in which to understand the above experiences. Camus offered us:

- the notion that contemplation of the everyday, mechanical repetition, ephemeral experiences can bring to consciousness the absurd sensibility;
- the idea of an underlying poverty of meaning, a feeling that undermines the sense of solidity and unity that humans crave;
- the fundamental concept of an irreconcilable rift between human and world, where man confronts a meaningless world and engages in an endless but ultimately vain effort to find a satisfying, unifying explanation;
- the rejection of religious, rationalist, phenomenological perspectives on finding the longed-for explanation of the world and close the rift;
- the idea of absurd creativity, which Camus sees as flowing naturally from the absence of eternal truth or explanation. Absurd man is neither able to accept any transcendent explanation of existence and yet cannot stop seeking one, leading to a frenzied state of creative limbo;
- a bivalency of thought: We revel in the ephemeral of the surface while retaining awareness of our questioning of the depth.

Paulos takes the idea of rift in a different direction, helping us understand how what to Camus is cause for both distress and creativity can emerge as a source of humor and enjoyment; this addition seems essential to a complete understanding of the absurd sensibility.

Baudrillard provided an intellectual connection between Camus, whose ideas concerned larger questions of transcendent meaning, and the more specific realms of

language and code. He also suggested a different perspective on the issue of finding meaning by exploring depth; where Camus would like to discover transcendent meaning in the depth of existence, Baudrillard rejects this kind of thinking and stays at the surface of things, finding pleasure instead in the destruction of meaning. Baudrillard's views included:

- exploration of the notion that structural properties of language can impart signification. This contrasts with a Camusian sensibility, which suggests a human desire to uncover fundamental truths underlying our existence (and perhaps underlying our language);
- rejection of the notion of meaning hidden within the structure of language, replaced by the idea that poetic pleasure is found by the very *liquidation* of meaning;
- dismissal of the notion of positive meaning – a produced signified underlying language or psychoanalysis – and instead a reveling in the negative enjoyment of a dispersal of meaning.

With these views, we have a philosophical foundation that takes into account both the search for underlying meaning and pleasure in its rejection; it recognizes the notion of out-of-control repetition, proliferation, or automation but also finds humor, play, and creativity in this. The absurd, we might say, oscillates between these poles. We take these philosophical perspectives with us as we continue our exploration of the absurd. Next we will consider the absurd from the perspective of literature and drama.

CHAPTER III

THE LINGUISTIC ABSURD

3.1 From Philosophy to Literature and Drama

Having considered the philosophical concept of the absurd in the previous chapter, we now examine manifestations of absurd philosophy in literature and drama. A careful analysis of several works will allow us to assemble a collection of absurdist techniques that may help us better understand the absurd and how it might relate to the digital.

As we grapple with feelings of digital discomfort and explore whether the absurd can help us understand them, a selection of works will help us develop a basic typology of the absurd to help with our analysis. Our goal is to explore absurdist works to the extent that they may help us understand the digital, rather than to present a comprehensive view of all absurdist literature and drama. In this vein, I will choose only a few absurdist works that I consider emblematic of the category.

As we transition from the philosophical to the literary absurd, the ideas of drama critic Martin Esslin will help us connect the two bodies of thought. It was Esslin in the 1960s who first borrowed the term *absurd* from Camus and applied it to drama, as part of the notion of the Theater of the Absurd. In creating this phrase, Esslin attached the term from the outside to several dramatists who may or may not have embraced the concept. We should therefore carefully explore exactly how this term bridges the two areas of thought.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the philosophical absurd grapples with questions of meaning in a fundamental sense, touching on ideas of religion or other metaphysical concepts. As with other philosophical argumentation, the philosophical absurd presents arguments about irrationality of the human condition in the form of

lucid and logically constructed reasoning. In contrast, works of the literary and dramatic absurd tend not to deal directly with transcendent questions (though some, we will see, might be interpreted in that way) or philosophical argumentation. Rather, they adopt techniques that broadly explore some of the same ground as the philosophical absurd, but in a less direct fashion; these techniques may question meaning and other bedrock assumptions, suggest the senselessness of the human condition, or highlight the inadequacy of the rational approach – but in many cases the dramatic absurd reaches for these goals by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought. In Esslin’s view, the Theater of the Absurd has renounced arguing *about* the absurdity of the human condition; it merely presents it in being – that is, in terms of concrete stage images.

In a sense, the contrast between the philosophical absurd and its dramatic and literary manifestations is not different from other philosophical streams of thought that also have companion literary movements; Sartre’s work both as a technical philosopher and as a writer and dramatist comes to mind. But the absurd differs in perhaps two ways. The connection between the philosophical and the literary is perhaps looser, with little direct collaboration between writers and philosophers. And, perhaps as a result, it may seem difficult to connect the ideas of absurdist drama with the ideas of absurdist philosophy; for that matter, one may struggle even to locate ideas within absurdist drama that may seem utterly pointless, thoroughly irrational, or completely nihilistic.

Esslin help us connect the two fields of thought, suggesting that that absurd literature shares in the philosophical absurd’s questioning of the traditional grounding of meaning: the hallmark of the absurd work is “the sense that the certitudes and unshakeable assumptions of former ages have been swept away, that they have been tested and found wanting” (Esslin 23). This includes questioning of religious faith and

of the substitutes that have attempted to take its place: progress, nationalism, totalitarianism. The absurd becomes that which is left in the aftermath of the weakening of such grounding principles, a residue of thought and action that is unmotivated, unfounded, ungrounded. In Esslin's words: "Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless" (Esslin 23). While the two areas share this overall concern with metaphysical crisis, we will see that the literary and dramatic absurd relies more on certain devices or conventions to achieve the effect of questioning or undermining, and it is these devices I find most useful to observe in our journey towards the digital absurd.

3.2 Two Aspects of the Absurd

Before beginning to explore specific works, I pause to suggest two types of the absurd that will play a role in our explorations. These will begin as somewhat notional concepts and will be developed as we examine particular works of literature and drama. I call these two aspects of the absurd the *linguistic absurd* and the *logical absurd*.

The linguistic absurd plays on the indeterminacy of language and employs techniques of babbling, failed efforts of communication, repetition, and untidy proliferation to create tension between meaning and nonmeaning. We will see techniques of the linguistic absurd employed extensively in classic plays by Beckett and Pinter. We will also observe this sort of absurdity in a close reading of Beckett's *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnameable* trilogy.

The linguistic absurd is perhaps the most traditional or conventional notion of the absurd, and it is this aspect of the absurd that Esslin highlights in suggesting that the absurd "tends toward a radical devaluation of language" (Esslin 26). In the linguistic absurd we may sense a subordination of language, a banality, or an ineffectiveness of language rarely seen in other drama. In many works we also find an absence of

the marks of traditional literature and drama – high-level structures of language such as clever or intricate plot, subtle character development and motivation, or a clear theme.

The logical absurd, on the other hand, may seem subtler than the linguistic and employs techniques of algorithmic manipulation, mathematical structuring (combinatoric arrangement of narrative elements, for example), logical operations (contradiction, negation, paradox), or geometric arrangement. Example works include Raymond Roussel's *Impressions of Africa*; Oulipian works such as Georges Perec's *Life A User's Manual* and Raymond Queneau's *Exercises In Style*; and Lewis Carroll's *Alice In Wonderland* and *Through The Looking Glass*. These works can also create similar effects as the linguistic absurd, drawing meaning or metaphysical foundations into question, though their techniques are quite different.



Figure 3: Conceptual Map from Linguistic to Logical Absurd

The concepts of linguistic and logical absurd will be elaborated through consideration of several works of literature and drama. The works will be presented as a gradual movement along a continuum from the linguistic absurd to the logic absurd. Starting with drama of Pinter and Beckett, two of the most canonical (linguistic) absurdist dramatists, we move to Beckett's trilogy, where we begin to catch a subtle glimpse of techniques of the logical absurd. Later, we consider stronger examples of the logical absurd in the work of Raymond Roussel and in Oulipian authors.



Figure 4: Conceptual Map from Linguistic to Logical Absurd: Drama of Pinter and Beckett

3.3 *Techniques of the Linguistic Absurd: Drama of Pinter and Beckett*

To help define the concept of the linguistic absurd, it is useful to consider prototypical examples. We will draw these primarily from some of the well-known dramatic works of Harold Pinter and of Samuel Beckett. This section offers only a brief categorization of techniques and examples; we will then delve more deeply into a specific work, Beckett's trilogy.

In general, we can characterize the techniques of the classic absurd as involving linguistic failures of various types. Often, the failure takes on a simultaneous feeling of humor and despair, lending the linguistic absurd an air of tragicomedy. I review several characteristics of the linguistic absurd in our review of classic absurdist drama.

3.3.1 Failures of Communication

The classic absurd presents a myriad of situations involving a breakdown of communication, often these situations turn on misunderstandings or disputes over quite ordinary language. Such linguistic failures are one of the hallmarks of Pinter's work, as we see in *The Dumb Waiter*, as two hit men wait for their next victim to arrive in a small room; as they wait, they argue over the seemingly minor detail of a common phrase for readying the cooking apparatus to prepare a snack (Pinter 141):

Ben. Go and light it.

Gus. Light what?

Ben. The kettle.

Gus. You mean the gas.

Ben. Who does?

Gus. You do.

Ben. (his eyes narrowing). What do you mean, I mean the gas?

Gus. Well, that's what you mean, don't you? The gas.

Ben. (powerfully). If I say go and light the kettle I mean go and light the kettle.

Gus. How can you light a kettle?

Ben. It's a figure of speech! Light the kettle. It's a figure of speech!

Gus. I've never heard it.

Ben. Light the kettle! It's common usage!

Gus. I think you've got it wrong.

Ben. (menacing). What do you mean?

Gus. They say put on the kettle.

Ben. (taut). Who says?

(They stare at each other, breathing hard.)

This is amusing, but we also notice their distress at their inability to come to agreement on the simplest of linguistic tasks. On another level, we might detect an element of one-upmanship in this exchange, as Gus resorts to an excessively technical detail in critiquing Ben's word choice. Behind this failure of language lies an essentially dark view of the human condition; in this case, we see Gus's intent to use words as weapons, to control and obfuscate rather than to communicate or enlighten.

In a similar vein, Pinter's characters often resort to specialized or technical language to establish power or dominance. In *The Caretaker*, a hobo named Davies has arrived in the home of brothers Mick and Aston, where he attempts to create a rift between the brothers to secure a position as caretaker of the property. In the final

climactic scene, Mick turns on Davies, unleashing a cavalcade of specialized language (Pinter 81):

Mick. ...I understood you were an experienced first-class professional interior and exterior decorator.

Davies. Now look here—

Mick. You mean you wouldn't know how to fit teal-blue, copper and parchment linoleum squares and have those colours re-echoed in the walls?

Davies. Now look here, where'd you get—?

Mick. You wouldn't be able to decorate out a table in afromosia teak veneer, an armchair in oatmeal tweed and a beech frame settee with a woven sea-grass seat?

Davis. I never said that!

Mick. Christ! I must have been under a false impression!

Davies. I never said it!

Mick. You're a bloody impostor, mate!

Underlying this rather unexpected torrent of interior design lingo, we see Mick's intent to confuse and disorient Davies. These examples illustrate the linguistic absurd's broad characteristic of linguistic confusion or failure. Pinter has suggested an elusiveness of shared understanding at work behind these and other scenes and that seems fundamental to the linguistic absurd:

We will all interpret a common experience quite differently, though we prefer to subscribe to the view that there's a shared common ground, a known ground. I think there's a shared common ground all right, but that it's more like a quicksand. Because 'reality' is quite a strong firm word we tend to think, or to hope, that the state to which it refers is equally

firm, settled, and unequivocal. It doesn't seem to be, and in my opinion, it's no worse or better for that (Pinter 12).

In this we can trace a connection with the philosophical absurd of Camus: both share a concern with the grounding of meaning. While the philosophical absurd suggests an ultimate lack of grounding for meaning, it does not reject the possibility of relative oases of meaning (such as language); this technique of absurdist drama suggests that even language may not supply a respite from meaninglessness.

3.3.2 Uncontrolled, Messy Proliferation

Within the linguistic absurd we frequently see a proliferation of language, and often this language borders on the nonsensical. While more traditional works may offer clear, logical language, absurdist language may seem repetitive, banal, or simply bizarre. For example, in Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, two strangers appear at a boarding house occupied by Stanley Webber; these loquacious strangers, Goldberg and McCann, apparently know Stanley from an unspecified previous association. In a climactic moment, they begin to interrogate Stanley about his past, but the questioning quickly becomes a barrage of implications about the past, intermixed with pure nonsense (Pinter 58):

Goldberg. Webber, what were you doing yesterday?

Stanley. Yesterday?

Goldberg. And the day before. What did you do the day before that?

Stanley. What do you mean?

...

Goldberg. What did you wear last week, Webber? Where do you keep
your suits?

McCann. Why did you leave the organization?

Goldberg. What would your old mum say, Webber?

McCann. Why did you betray us?

...

Goldberg. Where did you come from?

Stanley. Somewhere else.

Goldberg. Why did you come here?

Stanley. My feet hurt!

Goldberg. Why did you stay?

Stanley. I had a headache!

Goldberg. Did you take anything for it?

Stanley. Yes.

Goldberg. What?

Stanley. Fruit salts!

Goldberg. Enos or Andrews?

Stanley. En- An-

Goldberg. Did you stir properly? Did they fizz?

Stanley. Now, now, wait, you- Goldberg. Did they fizz? Did they fizz or
didn't they fizz? McCann. He doesn't know!

...

Goldberg. Do you recognize an external force?

McCann. That's the question!

Goldberg. Do you recognize an external force, responsible for you, suffer-
ing for you?

Stanley. It's late.

Goldberg. Late! Late enough! When did you last pray?

McCann. He's sweating!

Goldberg. Is the number 846 possible or necessary?

Stanley. Neither.

Goldberg. Wrong! Is the number 846 possible or necessary?

Stanley. Both.

Goldberg. Wrong! It's necessary but not possible.

Stanley. Both.

Goldberg. Wrong! Why do you think the number 846 is necessarily possible?

Stanley. Must be.

Goldberg. Wrong! It's only necessarily necessary! We admit possibility only after we grant necessity. It is possible because necessary but by no means necessary through possibility. The possibility can only be assumed after the proof of necessity.

The questions become increasingly bizarre and embarrassing as the interrogation continues: Why do you pick your nose? What about Ireland? What do you use for pyjamas? You stuff yourself with dry toast. What about the blessed Oliver Plunkett? Why did the chicken cross the road? Which came first? Faced with this wall of words, Stanley is reduced to screams and monosyllabic noises. Though he continues to appear in the remainder of the play, he never speaks again.

Later, we witness Goldberg and McCann chattering incessantly over a silent Stanley; we get the feeling that their barrage of language has subdued or broken Stanley (Pinter 92):

Goldberg. It goes without saying. Between you and me, Stan, it's about time you had a new pair of glasses.

McCann. You can't see straight.

Goldberg. It's true. You've been cockeyed for years.

McCann. Now you're even more cockeyed.

Goldberg. He's right. You've gone from bad to worse.

McCann. Worse than worse.

Goldberg. You need a long convalescence.

McCann. A change of air.

Goldberg. Somewhere over the rainbow.

McCann. Where angels fear to tread.

Goldberg. Exactly.

McCann. You're in a rut.

Goldberg. You look anaemic.

McCann. Rheumatic.

Goldberg. Myopic.

McCann. Epileptic.

Goldberg. You're on the verge.

McCann. You're a dead duck.

Goldberg. But we can save you.

McCann. From a worse fate.

Goldberg. True.

McCann. Undeniable.

Goldberg. From now on, we'll be the hub of your wheel.

McCann. We'll renew your season ticket.

Goldberg. We'll take tuppence off your morning tea.

McCann. We'll give you a discount on all inflammable goods.

Goldberg. We'll watch over you.

McCann. Advise you.

Goldberg. Give you proper care and treatment.

This constant back-and-forth shows again the creation of a blizzard of words where the meaning seems secondary; a combination of humor and sinister control appears more important than the denotative meaning. Goldberg and McCann seem a strange

hybrid, like a cross between two overly solicitous Warner Brothers chipmunks and sinister mobsters who verbosely promise protection while implying harm. But from the perspective of the linguistic absurd, the essential point is the use of language as an effect, where meaning is drained amidst a blizzard of verbiage.

Pinter has suggested a feeling of ambivalence about language which may reveal something of the absurdist conception of language:

I have mixed feelings about words myself. Moving among them, sorting them out, watching them appear on the page, from this I derive a considerable pleasure. But at the same time I have another strong feeling about words which amounts to nothing less than nausea. Such a weight of words confronts us day in, day out, words spoken in a context such as this, words written by me and by others, the bulk of it is a stale dead terminology; ideas endlessly repeated and permuted become platitudinous, trite, meaningless... (Pinter 13).

Pinter's attitude suggests a weariness and exhaustion with communication, along with the idea that an increased volume of words and communication serves not to refine or sharpen communication but rather to devalue it. This seemingly paradoxical point implies that, at some point, the relationship between communication and meaning becomes inverted, and language thereafter serves to destroy rather than impart meaning. Beckett's *Waiting For Godot* too implies this kind of relationship, portraying language reduced to the meaningless noises of nature. As the two tramps wait fruitlessly for a Mr. Godot who never appears, they engage in a something of a meta-discussion (Beckett, *I Can't Go On*, 435):

Estragon. In the meantime let us try and converse calmly, since we are
incapable of keeping silent.

Vladimir. You are right, we're inexhaustible.

Estragon. It's so we won't think.

Vladimir. We have that excuse.

Estragon. It's so we won't hear.

Vladimir. We have our reasons.

Estragon. All the dead voices.

Vladimir. They make a noise like wings.

Estragon. Like leaves.

Vladimir. Like sand.

Estragon. Like leaves.

(Silence)

Vladimir. They all speak together.

Estragon. Each one to itself.

(Silence)

Vladimir. Rather they whisper.

Estragon. They rustle.

Vladimir. They murmur.

Estragon. They rustle.

(Silence)

Vladimir. What do they say?

Estragon. They talk about their lives.

Vladimir. To have lived is not enough for them.

Estragon. They have to talk about it.

Vladimir. To be dead is not enough for them.

Estragon. It is not sufficient.

(Silence)

Vladimir. They make a noise like feathers.

Estragon. Like leaves.

Vladimir. Like ashes.

Estragon. Like leaves.

3.3.3 Repetition

As seen in the Godot quote above, repetition often accompanies the proliferation of language. (Perhaps one response to exhaustion is to babble, while another is to repeat.) Pinter employs repetition in several of his works to create an effect of humor and pathos, as in this scene from *The Caretaker*, after the drifter Davies has met Aston's somewhat rude and aggressive brother Mick (Pinter 49):

Davies. Who was that feller?

Aston. He's my brother.

Davies. Is he? He's a bit of a joker, en' he?

Aston. Uh.

Davies. Yes... he's a real joker.

Aston. Yes, I noticed.

(Pause.)

Aston. He's a real joker, that lad, you can see that.

(Pause.)

Aston. Yes, he tends... he tends to see the funny side of things.

Davies. Well, he's got a sense of humor, en' he?

Aston. Yes.

Davies. Yes, you could tell that.

No fewer than five times we are subjected to the idea that Mick is a joker, has a sense of humor, sees the funny side of things. We might find this repetition exasperating in the same way as excessive repetition in everyday conversation, which prevents conversational progress and perhaps implies a lack of understanding. Or perhaps we might interpret this repetition as a humorous commentary between playwright and

audience about Davies' linguistic or mental limitations; he simply cannot seem to expand the idea successfully, instead relying on rote repetition as he becomes more comfortable with the notion. Or we might view this exchange as a commentary on these characters' depressing inability to control language to create a satisfying interaction with any degree of nuance. All of these interpretations seem plausible, and perhaps the various interpretations help explain the complex feelings these exchanges may create.

Repetition is so endemic and integral to Pinter's work that it seems difficult to choose representative examples. In general, Pinter's repetitions serve to create a feeling of linguistic emptiness or failure on one level, though these exchanges cannot be said to be unrevealing or unnecessary. In *The Birthday Party*, for example, as husband and wife Meg and Petey sit down to breakfast, Meg asks Petey about his cornflakes (Pinter 19):

Meg. I've got your cornflakes ready. (She disappears and reappears.)

Here's your cornflakes. . .

Meg. Are they nice?

Petey. Very nice.

Meg. I thought they'd be nice.

. . .

Petey. I've finished my cornflakes.

Meg. Were they nice?

Petey. Very nice.

Underlying this repetitious exchange of the colorless, nondescript word *nice* is a linguistic emptiness that may very well indicate a larger emptiness within their relationship or in their mental states. Later, after the party, we observe Meg repeating the idea of her beauty and success at the party (Pinter 97):

Meg. I was the belle of the ball.

Petey. Were you?

Meg. Oh yes. They all said I was.

Petey. I bet you were too.

Meg. Oh, it's true. I was. (Pause.) I know I was.

In this case, the repetition underscores Meg's attempt to conceal reality by emphasizing the somewhat preposterous idea of her beauty and elegance. In any case, repetition in absurdist works tends to emphasize a surface vacuity and an underlying spiritual emptiness, mental poverty, self-deception, or linguistic incapability.

Pinter has suggested an interesting double-sidedness to this sort of language in his work, where repetition creates a stream of words that seem rather empty of meaning, a repetitive proliferation of language that serves to obscure rather than reveal:

There are two silences. One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed. This speech is speaking of a language locked beneath it. That is its continual reference. The speech we hear is an indication of that which we don't hear. It is a necessary avoidance, a violent, sly, anguished or mocking smoke screen which keeps the other in its place. When true silence falls we are still left with echo but are nearer nakedness. One way of looking at speech is to say that it is a constant stratagem to cover nakedness.

We have heard many times that tired, grimy phrase: 'failure of communication', and this phrase has been fixed to my work quite consistently. I believe the contrary. I think that we communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid, and that what takes place is a continual evasion, desperate rearguard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves. Communication is too alarming. To enter into someone else's life is too frightening.

To disclose to others the poverty within us is too fearsome a possibility
(Pinter 15).

3.3.4 Identity and Naming Problems

A final signal characteristic of the linguistic absurd concerns the stability of names and identities. Often, absurdist works create a sense of doubt or instability through characters who respond to different names; there is often little explanation of these different names, and we are left wondering about the background and identity of the characters. For example, in *The Caretaker*, after Aston has rescued the drifter Davies from a conflagration and given him shelter in his home, Davies attempts to explain his name and identity (Pinter 28):

Aston. Why do you want to get down to Sidcup?

Davies. I got my papers there!

(Pause)

Aston. Your what?

Davies. I got my papers there!

(Pause)

Aston. What are they doing at Sidcup?

Davies. A man I know has got them. I left them with him. You see?

They prove who I am! I can't move without them papers. They tell
you who I am. You see! I'm stuck without them.

Aston. Why's that?

Davies. You see, what it is, you see, I changed my name! Years ago. I
been going around under an assumed name! That's not my real name.

Aston. What name you been going under?

Davies. Jenkins. Bernard Jenkins. That's my name. That's the name
I'm known, anyway. But it's no good me going on with that name. I

got no rights. I got an insurance card here. (He takes a card from his pocket.) Under the name of Jenkins. See? Bernard Jenkins. Look. It's got four stamps on it. Four of them. But I can't go along with these. That's not my real name, they'd find out, they'd have me in the nick. Four stamps. I haven't paid out pennies. I've paid out pounds. I've paid out pounds, not pennies. There's been other stamps, plenty, but they haven't put them on, the nigs, I never had enough time to go into it.

Aston. They should have stamped your card.

Davies. It would have done no good! I'd have got nothing anyway. That's not my real name. If I take that card along I go in the nick.

Aston. What's your real name, then?

Davies. Davies. Mac Davies. That was before I changed my name.

His frequent repetition of his story's elements seems not to clarify so much as obscure: We don't really understand Davies' motivation for changing his name, whether his real name is indeed Davies, whether his papers are indeed with a man in Sidcup, and what other races may have to do with his name change. This exchange undermines our certainty about these characters and their backgrounds; in a broad sense it also calls into question language's capacity to achieve the simplest of tasks: naming an item or a person, thereby creating doubt about language in general.

Other examples of naming issues abound in absurdist drama: In the previous citation from Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, we heard the repetitive chatter of Goldberg and McCann, the mysterious visitors in the boarding house. Goldberg, whose name we are told is Nat, reflects on his childhood in a different scene (Pinter 53):

Goldberg. . . . "Simey!" my old mum used to shout, "quick before it gets cold." And there on the table what would I see? The nicest piece of gefilte fish you could wish to find on a plate.

McCann. I thought your name was Nat.

Goldberg. She called me Simey.

Later, Goldberg reflects on his marriage (Pinter 69):

Goldberg. . . . "Simey," my wife used to shout, "quick, before it gets cold!"

And there on the table what would I see? The nicest piece of rollmop
and pickled cucumber you could wish to find on a plate.

Lulu. I thought your name was Nat.

Goldberg. She called me Simey.

Near the end of the play, McCann calls Goldberg by the name Simey, eliciting a furious response (Pinter 86):

McCann. Simey!

Goldberg. (opening his eyes, regarding McCann). What – did – you –
call – me?

McCann. Who?

Goldberg. (murderously). Don't call me that! (He seizes McCann by the
throat.) NEVER CALL ME THAT!

In these exchanges we see a combination of humor and unease; the similarity of the first two exchanges may leave us laughing at the mechanical repetition of lines, but we also find a certain strangeness in the reference: Why do we only know him as Nat, and why does he explode into violence at the innocuous mention of this alternate name?

We see a related phenomenon in Beckett's *Waiting For Godot*: The main characters are named Estragon and Vladimir, but a boy messenger refers to Vladimir as Mr. Albert, and when asked his name, Estragon replies that it is Catallus. An unsettling impermanence of identity (or perhaps of memory) also crops up in the play; when

Pozzo and Lucky first appear, neither Vladimir nor Estragon seem to know them, but after they leave, Vladimir comments that they seem to have changed since their last appearance. And in the second act, when Pozzo and Lucky appear again, Vladimir and Estragon are again uncertain whether they are the same people they met the previous day.

Overall, these examples display some signal qualities of the linguistic absurd: to both humorous and disturbing effect, we see characteristics of repetition, proliferation, naming and identity problems, and general failures of communication. As we continue our exploration of varieties of the absurd and how it may relate to the digital, we will now explore in depth a single work to examine its features of both linguistic and logical absurdity. Perhaps more than any other work, Beckett's trilogy *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnameable* displays characteristics of both types of absurdity within the same work, and in this it provides a stimulating view of the two absurdities working in juxtaposition.

3.4 *Beckett's Trilogy*

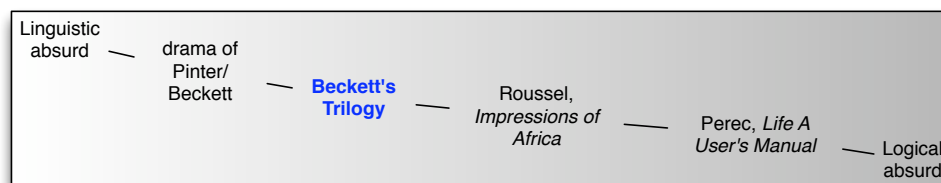


Figure 5: Conceptual Map from Linguistic to Logical Absurd: Beckett's Trilogy

A rather bizarre collection of novels, the nature of Beckett's trilogy is the subject of some debate; some see in it an example of the linguistic absurd par excellence, showing characteristics similar to those we saw above. Others see a different logic at work and suggest that the trilogy marks a departure from more prototypical absurdist works. I believe we can clearly see both impulses at work, and I will outline families of techniques that belong to each. This duality offers us an unusual opportunity to

compare the two techniques within the same work, and the trilogy thus gives us a first conceptual step on our way towards elaborating the logical absurd.

Before citing detailed examples from the trilogies, one would like to offer a general summary to orient and contextualize the discussion. But, perhaps even more than the dramatic examples above, the trilogy seems to defy this sort of summary. Whatever plot exists seems quite secondary, and it is difficult to identify major points of action that are not subject to substantial doubt. It can even be difficult to identify distinct characters, since the novel doubt about the existence or the distinctness of certain characters. These aspects present an obstacle even to the most basic summary. I believe that the techniques we shall highlight below in fact serve to illustrate the most interesting aspects of the trilogy, but perhaps the following bare-bones summary will establish a broad background against which to consider them:

- In part one of *Molloy*, the narrator awakes in a room he suggests used to belong to his mother; he determines to visit her, but his efforts to find her prove unsuccessful, and we last see him crippled and lost in the forest.
- In part two of *Molloy*, we meet Moran, who is apparently some kind of detective or investigator; Moran is given orders to find Molloy (for reasons unclear to us and to him) and sets out with his son on the mission. His efforts prove unsuccessful as he gradually becomes crippled and incapacitated in the forest.
- In the second novel, *Malone Dies*, the main character lies in bed in a room of some sort and recounts several tales while he awaits his apparently impending death. There does seem to be some similarity among the tales of Malone and those of Molloy and Moran, though the overlap seems partial at best, leaving us quite free to speculate on the relationship among these characters.
- In the final novel, *The Unnameable*, a hazy presence reflects on his own identity as he seems to morph from one character to another; at one point we are given

to conceive of his physicality as nothing more than a brain in a jar.

Attempting to summarize these stories imparts little of what is most significant about them. I believe it is more useful to reflect on certain characteristics and techniques of the texts, since their sensibility and pleasure derive more from these techniques than from more traditional novelistic structures.

In general, the linguistic absurd may be fairly described as a somewhat negative sensibility; as we saw in the previous section, common themes may include failure, impotence, immobility, vagueness, exhaustion, uncertainty, boredom, or disorganization. In many ways, the trilogy exemplifies these characteristics to such an extent that we may conceive of it as a prototypically linguistically absurd text. The following points demonstrate the linguistic absurd at work.

3.4.1 Confusion and Uncertainty

Perhaps even more than in Pinter's drama, Beckett undermines our sense of confidence and certainty by introducing doubt into many statements or omitting what we might normally consider fundamental information. For example, at the beginning of *Molloy*, we find the main character (whose name we actually do not learn until well into the novel) alone in a room, grappling with essential gaps in knowledge of himself and his situation:

I am in my mother's room. It's I who live there now. I don't know how I got there. Perhaps in an ambulance, certainly a vehicle of some kind. I was helped. I'd never have got there alone. There's this man who comes every week. Perhaps I got there thanks to him. He says not. He gives me money and takes away the pages (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 7).

Naturally, we wonder about the identity of this man, how he got to his mother's room, the identity of the other who comes every week, what sort of pages he takes

away, and whether perhaps the person in the room represents the author of the text we're reading. We would expect some resolution to these questions over the course of a more traditional novel, but *Molloy* offers little.

From the outset and in a thousand ways, the novel builds upon our confusion and uncertainty. The narrator quickly moves into a description of a meeting, opening the recounting with a depiction inducing a sense of haziness, brokenness, and unreality: "All grows dim. A little more and you'll go blind. It's in the head. It doesn't work any more, it says, I don't work any more. You go dumb as well and sounds fade" (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 8). Two nameless characters, A and C, apparently meet on a road outside of town; little is revealed about these two people, and we are not even certain they are different from the narrator himself: "People pass too, hard to distinguish from yourself. That is discouraging" (8). The narrator even suggests doubt over the most basic facts of this episode, saying "I am perhaps confusing several different occasions, and different times... perhaps it was A one day at one place, then C another at another" (14). As the narrative (we may apply this term only in a loose sense to such a text as the trilogy) proceeds, *Molloy* resolves to find his mother, but throughout part one the text continually subverts our efforts to grasp stable facts and meanings.

Part two seems to mark a different feeling and perspective, and our hope is raised for more concrete and traditional language and plot. We are introduced to an investigator named Moran; unlike *Molloy*, his story seems to begin with more organization and clarity, as it is at least presented in distinct paragraphs. We quickly learn that Moran has a sharp and withering wit as he subjects his son and servant to rude and outrageous remarks; this perhaps provides an amusing counterpoint to *Molloy*'s cloudier commentary. But early in part two we begin to see critical gaps that undermine our sense of confidence and certainty: Early on Moran is visited by Gaber, a representative of Youdy, the mysterious head of Moran's agency. We realize that we

know little of Moran's background and work or of Youdy, Gaber, or their organization. We know only that Moran's orders are to find Molloy, and this lack of clarity will come to haunt Moran (and us) as the novel proceeds.

Like an errant thread that, when pulled, leads to the unraveling of the garment, the lack of clarity over his mission seems to lead Moran towards uncertainty and mental breakdown. He even begins to doubt the existence of Molloy:

Molloy, or Mollose, was no stranger to me. If I had had colleagues, I might have suspected I had spoken of him to them, as of one destined to occupy us, sooner or later. But I had no colleagues and I knew nothing of the circumstances in which I had learned of his existence. Perhaps I had invented him, I mean found him ready made in my head. There is no doubt one sometimes meets with strangers who are not entire strangers, through their having played a part in certain cerebral reels (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 111)

In this reflection, we see an echo of Molloy's earlier confusion between the real and the imagined ("It's in the head") as he discussed A and C. As Moran attempts to find Molloy, we are reminded several times that he no longer remembers his mission, if he ever knew it:

I gave fitful thought, while basking in the balm of the warm summer days, to Gaber's instructions. I could not reconstruct them to my entire satisfaction. . . What was I looking for exactly? It is hard to say. I was looking for what was wanting to make Gaber's statement complete. I felt he must have told me what to do with Molloy once he was found. . . (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 136).

In *Molloy* as well as in the later novels, we see these sorts of broad issues of confusion and uncertainty, and these are supplemented by more specific techniques

that add to our sense of unsteadiness of foundation, such as direct statement of contradiction.

3.4.2 Outright Contradiction

The novels frequently display a technique that serves to undermine our sense of certainty and refuse us the satisfaction of uncontested fact: a statement followed immediately by questioning or contradiction. Examples are too numerous to list exhaustively, but several are listed here to give an idea of the technique:

- Molloy, speaking of A and C: “They looked alike, but no more than others do” (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 9).
- Molloy, speaking of A and C: “A and C I never saw again... And am I sure I never saw them again? And what do I mean my seeing and seeing again?” (15).
- Molloy, speaking of A or C: “A little dog followed him, a pomeranian I think, but I don’t think so” (11).
- Molloy, of the town where his mother may live: “I passed beyond them, into a district I did not know. And yet I knew the town well, for I was born there and had never succeeded in putting between it and me more than ten or fifteen miles, such was its grasp on me, I don’t know why” (31).
- Moran, speaking of his experiences: “Oh the stories I could tell you, if I were easy. What a rabble in my head, what a gallery of moribunds. Murphy, Watt, Yerk, Mercier and all the others. I would never have believed that – yes, I believe it willingly. Stories, stories. I have not been able to tell them. I shall not be able to tell this one” (137).

As with the general confusion we saw in the previous section, this technique also serves to undermine our sense of confidence. But whereas previous examples operate

more at a macro level of structure, here the contradiction appears at a micro level of detail, with assertion and refutation appearing sometimes within the same sentence.

3.4.3 Naming and Identity Issues

As we saw in the previous section, the prototypically absurd drama of Beckett and Pinter increases our sense of uncertainty by injecting doubt about characters' names: Goldberg may actually be named Simey, Davies may be Jenkins, Estragon may really be called Catallus. The seeming arbitrariness of this name-swapping combines with other techniques to create something of a screwball humor juxtaposed alongside perhaps serious questions about the characters' identity. In the trilogy, we see a similar kind of naming issue, though in contrast to the ephemeral dropped hints of the plays, naming and identity becomes the subject of more extended reflection as the trilogy proceeds. Indeed if there can be said to be a theme of these sometimes abstruse works, issues of identity and the language surrounding it would seem a plausible candidate.

In some cases, we see this theme in the casual remarks of various characters as they grapple with remembering proper names:

- Molloy, speaking of his mother: "She never called me son, fortunately, but Dan, I don't know why, my name is not Dan" (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 17).
- Molloy, of an older woman lover: "It was she made me acquainted with love. She went by the name of Ruth I think, but I can't say for certain. Perhaps the name was Edith..." (56).
- Molloy, of the old lover again: "And I even think I've had time to love one or two, or not with true love, no, nothing like the old woman, I've lost her name again, Rose, no, anyway you see who I mean..." (83)
- Moran, questioning the name of his quarry: "Molloy, or Mollose, was no stranger to me" (111)

- Malone, at the point where he decides to use the name Macmann for the character Sapo: “For Sapo – no, I can’t call him that any more, and I even wonder how I was able to stomach such a name till now. So then for, let me see, for Macmann, that’s not much better but there is no time to lose...” (229)

But the fluidity and elusiveness of identity is perhaps suggested at a deeper level in more extended comments. For example, as Moran reflects on Molloy amidst his increasing uncertainty over Molloy’s existence and his purpose in finding him, he introduces the notion of a multiplicity of Molloys, where each who holds a concept of Molloy in fact creates a different identity, separate from one the existent being:

The fact was there were three, no, four Molloys. He that inhabited me, my caricature of same, Gaber’s and the man of flesh and blood somewhere awaiting me. To these I would add Youdi’s were it not for Gaber’s corpse fidelity to the letter of his messages. Bad reasoning. For could it seriously be supposed that Youdi had confided to Gaber all he know, or thought he knew (all one to Youdi) about his protege. Assuredly not...I will therefore add a fifth Molloy, that of Youdi (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 115)

Alongside the citation above in which Moran doubts the existence of Molloy (“Perhaps I had invented him”), we are left questioning whether Molloy exists at all or is simply an elusive and multifarious shared mental construction. Such notions of fragmented identity are by now well established in the firmament of cultural theory, but the persistence of these ideas in the trilogy works alongside other techniques to reinforce a sensibility of unmoored bearings.

At another level, beyond the ruminations of the characters themselves, we find clues that lead us to question whether the trilogy’s characters in fact represent distinct people, or the same person, or perhaps a collection of partially overlapping identities that shift periodically and unpredictably. That is, in the way that Moran doubts

the existence or singularity of Molloy, we the reader also question the existence and identity of these various sketchy characters we meet in the novels. Through his characters, Beckett seems to offer playful hints that feed our sense of uncertainty, as when Molloy remarks of his stiff leg: “For I cannot stoop, neither can I kneel, because of my infirmity, and if I ever stoop, forgetting who I am, or kneel, make no mistake, it will not be me, but another” (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 36).

Malone too drops a playful hint to promote the notion of fluid identities coalescing over the course of the trilogy. After a break in recounting the travails of the character Macmann, Malone remarks that “I have taken a long time to find him again, but I have found him. How did I know it was he, I don’t know. And what can have changed him so? Life perhaps, the struggle to love, to eat, to escape the redressers of wrongs. I slip into him, I suppose in the hope of learning something” (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 226). “I slip into him” suggests the idea of a fluidity of identity, perhaps the sort of fluidity of an author inhabits a character to see the world from a new perspective. Or perhaps it suggests something more akin to multiple personality disorder, where we are given to wonder whether the stark room in which Malone finds himself may be a mental hospital. As with the previous suggestion of multiple Molloys, we later see the suggestion of a proliferation of Macmanns indistinguishable from each other:

It is true the Macmanns are legion in the island and pride themselves, what is more, with few exceptions, on having one and all, in the last analysis, sprung from the same illustrious ball. It is therefore inevitable they should resemble one another, now and then, to the point of being confused even in the mind of those who wish them well and would like nothing better than to tell between them. No matter, any old remains of flesh and spirit do, there is no sense in stalking people. So long as it is what is called a living being you can’t go wrong, you have the guilt one (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 259).

The most striking and extended meditation on identity issues appears, a propos of the title, in the trilogy's final novel, *The Unnamable*. Beginning in an apparently otherworldly place, a nameless narrator comments on characters Moran and Malone as they revolve like celestial bodies around him. This character comments with humorous bitterness about a mysterious "they" who compel him to speak; we come to understand these trilogy's previous characters as ephemeral creations in the narrator's grand struggle against language, his search for silence:

All these Murphys, Molloyes, and Malones do not fool me. They have made me waste my time, suffer for nothing, speak of them when, in order to stop speaking, I should have spoken of me and me alone (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 303)

As he banishes these previous characters in an effort to attain silence, we witness his contradictory struggle speak his way to silence. Descartes-like, he attempts to strip away everything nonessential to find that which is fundamental; where Descartes found thought, Beckett finds the unsilenceable voice:

Let us then assume nothing, neither that I move, nor that I don't, it's safer, since the thing is unimportant, and pass on to those that are. Namely? This voice that speaks, knowing that it lies, indifferent to what it says, too old perhaps and too abased ever to succeed in saying the words that would be its last... It issues from me, it fills me, it clamours against my walls, it is not mine, I can't stop it, I can't prevent it, from tearing me, racking me, assailing me. It is not mine, I have none, I have no voice and must speak, that is all I know... (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 307).

But despite his efforts to do away with character and to stifle the creation of new ones, we find the narrator creating another, first called Basil and then Mahood. We

first understand Basil to be one of the mysterious “they” who compel the narrator to speak; later it becomes unclear whether Basil-cum-Mahood is the master or the speaker:

Might it not rather be the praise of my master, intoned, in order to obtain his forgiveness? Or the admission that I am Mahood after all and these stories of a being whose identity he usurps, and whose voice he prevents from being heard, all lies from beginning to end? And what if Mahood were my master? (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 311)

Still later, we experience another metamorphosis of name or identity as Mahood becomes Worm. It seems hopeless to attempt to untangle this mess of names and identities, but this seems to be part and parcel of the linguistic absurd, which revels in the indeterminacy of names. In one sense, the trilogy seems a vast exercise in the creation and sloughing off of one identity after another; we peel back layer after layer of character but never gain the sense of having reached the stable bedrock of the underlying identity. The confusion of names and identities contributes to a general undermining of our confidence in the novel and thus heightens our sense of the linguistic absurd.

3.4.4 Babbling

Similar to the classic absurdist drama we saw previously, we notice in the trilogy a tendency towards verbal excess and proliferation, though in the trilogy this excess takes on an especially unstructured sensibility. From the beginning of part one of *Molloy*, a glance at the page gives an indication of the text’s long and rambling nature, as we see page upon page of perfectly square blocks of text, unbroken by paragraphs for more than 80 pages.

Mirroring this written form, the characters of the trilogy also engage in rambling proliferation. At one point on his journey to find his mother, Molloy (reflecting on his

journey while stuck in a ditch – a very suitable location for the sensibility Beckett’s work imparts!) thinks of the possibility of encountering again an unfriendly policeman from an earlier confrontation:

...no doubt some day I’ll meet again the sergeant and his merry men.
And if, too changed to know it is they, I do not say it is they, make no mistake, it will be they, though changed. For to contrive a being, a place, I nearly said an hour, but I would not hurt anyone’s feelings, and then to use them no more, that would be, how shall I say, I don’t know. Not to want to say, not to know what you want to say, not to be able to say what you think you want to say, and never to stop saying, or hardly ever, that is the thing to keep in mind, even in the heat of composition (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 28).

The idea of being unable to stop one’s own voice recurs throughout the trilogy, both through explicit reference, as in this quote, and in the fact of the characters’ verbal proliferation. Beckett seems to suggest the emergence of an explosion of verbiage from an underlying absence (“Not to want to say, not to know what you want to say...and never to stop saying”). This seems to recall the view of language suggested by Pinter, where verbal profusion reveals an underlying poverty of meaning (“...ideas endlessly repeated and permuted become platitudinous, trite, meaningless...”). Molloy seems to acknowledge this sapping of meaning in his own speech:

I mean that on reflexion, in the long run rather, my verbal profusion turned out to be penury, and inversely. So time sometimes turns the tables. In other words, or perhaps another thing, whatever I said it was never enough and always too much (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 34).

More than once, we see the suggestion that this verbal profusion threatens to lose meaning entirely, melding into an undifferentiated muddle of noise. (We recall

a similar idea from Vladimir and Estragon's patter.) This idea, present implicitly throughout the trilogy, comes to the fore in Malone's reflection:

What I mean is possibly this, that the noises of the world, so various in themselves and which I used to be so clever at distinguishing from one another, had been dinning at me for so long, always the same old noises, as gradually to have merged into a single noise, so that all I heard was one vast continuous buzzing. The volume of sound perceived remained no doubt the same, I had simply lost the faculty of decomposing it. The noises of nature, of mankind and even my own, were all jumbled together in one and the same unbridled gibberish (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 207).

Molloy too, while insisting that he has "quite a sensitive ear," is plagued by the same problem, where the words he hears disintegrate into "pure sounds, free of all meaning," like the "buzzing of an insect" (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 50).

3.4.5 Emphasis on Squalor, Death, Dejection, Weariness

By now our examples have already demonstrated another important quality in our consideration of the linguistic absurd: its tendency toward a rather dark and pessimistic worldview, at least on the surface. Within this despairing view, we see continual reference to a miscellany of despair, including immobility, vagueness, exhaustion, uncertainty, boredom, disorganization, and unrequited searching. Beckett's emphasis on "muck" reflects this emphasis: with striking similarity, the characters Molloy and Moran lie down in the muck of the forest as their legs stiffen and they become immobilized. We cannot help think that the idea of "muck" stands in for much more than physical grime, and it takes on a more philosophical note in Molloy's reflection on the muck of language:

And if I failed to mention this detail in its proper place, it is because you cannot mention everything in its proper place, you must choose, between

the things not worth mentioning and those even less so. For if you set out to mention everything you would never be done, and that's what counts, to be done, to have done. Oh I know, even when you mention only a few of the things there are, you do not get done either, I know, I know. But it's a change of muck. And if all muck is the same muck it doesn't matter, it's good to have a change of muck, to move from one heap to another a little further on... (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 41).

It is not a stretch to characterize this view as portraying language as valueless because of its unending abundance, similar to dirt. This view sits easily alongside the notion of the tedium of language and the desire for silence we saw in the previous section, so examples need not be repeated at length. "What tedium," Malone says many times, adding to the sense of weariness and exhaustion that pervades the trilogy. Sometimes the tedium gets the better of the narrator, as when Malone suffers a breakdown in recounting his story of the character Sapo:

In his country the problem – no, I can't do it. The peasants. His visits to. I can't. Assembled in the farmyard they watched him depart... (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 196).

Of course, Malone does continue his story. But the reader is left with a reduced sense of confidence in the narrator. It is perhaps not unlike the feeling one has when an evangelizing agent, rather than promoting an idea, instead delivers a crippling blow. Malone's negativity, itself part of the general valence of negativity and wretchedness pervading the trilogy, may be one example of a technique emphasizing the arbitrariness of the narrative, which we now consider.

3.4.6 Arbitrariness of Narrative

A few examples will give an idea of the arbitrariness that recurs throughout the trilogy:

- Malone, speaking of Sapo: “Sapo loved nature, took an interest ¶ This is awful. Sapo loved nature, took an interest in animals and plants. . .” (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 191)
- Malone, speaking of Sapo: “Sapo had no friends – no, that won’t do ¶ Sapo was on good terms with his little friends, though they did not exactly love him” (191)
- Malone, again speaking of Sapo: “In the afternoon he left the house, with his books under his arm, on the pretext that he worked better in the open air, no, without a word” (194)
- Molloy, speaking of A and C: “They knew each other perhaps. Now in any case they do, now I think they will know each other” (9)
- Molloy, speaking of his encounter with a shepherd: “I got to my knees, no, that doesn’t work. . .” (29)

This may be a specialized case of our second characteristic of outright contradiction. In these cases, though, the narrator makes a show of it, exposing his internal decision and its immediate reversal. This technique serves to undercut our confidence in the text and produces a feeling both unsettling and comic for its outlandishness in the face of tradition: In a traditional work we expect to find facts and details confidently asserted, without the author planting explicit doubt. Here, on the other hand, time and again we are subjected to an explicit statement of authorial indecision, error, and doubt.

3.4.7 Humor of the Abject and Nonsensical

We come to the end of our discussion of the characteristics of the linguistic absurd by noting an element that can easily become lost among weighty consideration of meaning and meaninglessness, of the abject and of despair. Alongside these elements

of confusion, contradiction, identity shifting, babbling, squalor, and arbitrariness (or perhaps simply as an alternate aspect of them), we see a distinct element of humor. Beckett emphasizes this humor in several ways throughout the text; it is difficult to choose specific examples of humor, since humor seems so fundamental to Beckett's approach; we could find hundreds of examples. In this section we limit our consideration to humor that might be regarded as related to the linguistic absurd; in fact we might consider this aspect as simply one way to interpret the characteristics and techniques we have considered above.

The sexual and the physical play a large role in the humor of the trilogy. While this may not seem immediately relevant to the notion of the linguistic absurd, I think it is broadly consistent: Alongside the trilogy's emphasis on impotence and frustration where language is concerned, we also see an emphasis on physical debilitation, sexual impotence, and other embarrassing details. Perhaps the latter is a physical manifestation of the former, as we see when Moran's mental breakdown happens in concert with his physical immobilization in the muck of the forest.

Or perhaps the connection is more simply through the notion of proliferation, of a language simply unable to rein itself in or to censor itself and thus wandering freely into the taboo. More than once, characters mention with candor the subject of masturbation. The humor of this is perhaps in its startling frankness, the ease with which the taboo topic is broached. (Or, in the case of Moran, another element of humor may be in the disparity between Moran's supercilious attitude and pompous verbiage contrasted with his frank admission of such an elemental human instinct.) In any event, this sort of humor may relate to the previously mentioned theme of unstoppable talking, to "not to want to say" and yet "never to stop saying". Among such an uncontrollable verbal torrent, one may expect to cross the lines of propriety from time to time.

We find particular attention is paid not just to the sexual, but to sexual impotence,

creating an impression that is darkly farcical (as might be said of the text in its totality). In discussing his stiff and useless leg, Molloy suggests the idea of removing additional useless body parts:

I would have been happier, livelier, amputated at the groin. And if they had removed a few testicles into the bargain I wouldn't have objected. For from such testicles as mine, dangling at mid-thigh at the end of a meagre cord, there was nothing more to be squeezed, not a drop (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 35).

Sexual impotence and incompetence also figures large in Molloy's description of his sexual encounters with an older woman of uncertain name, as it does with Malone's laughably pathetic and unappealing sexual relations with his older female caretaker Moll:

There sprang up gradually between them a kind of intimacy which, at a given moment, led them to lie together and copulate as best they could. For given their age and scant experience of carnal love, it was only natural they should not succeed, at the first shot, in giving each other the impression they were made for each other. The spectacle was then offered of Macmann trying to bundle his sex into his partner's like a pillow into a pillow-slip, folding it in two, and stuffing it in with his fingers (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 260)

Such discussion might seem simply sophomoric were it not successful in reinforcing the humor and wretchedness that seem fundamental to the linguistic absurd. Molloy mentions his practice of keeping warm in the muck of the forest:

And in winter, under my greatcoat, I wrapped myself in swathes of newspaper, and did not shed them until the earth awoke, for good, in April.

The Times Literary Supplement was admirably suited to this purpose, of a neverfailing toughness and impermeability. Even farts made no impression on it. I can't help it, gas escapes from my fundament on the least pretext, it's hard not to mention it now and then, however great my distaste. One day I counted them. Three hundred and fifteen farts in nineteen hours, or an average of over sixteen farts an hour. After all it's not excessive. Four farts every fifteen minutes. It's nothing. Not even one fart every four minutes.¹ It's unbelievable. Damn it, I hardly fart at all, I should never have mentioned it (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 30).

Beckett manages both to deliver an amusing critique of the literary establishment and to muse extendedly on the subject of flatulence, calculating the latter in some detail. This passage represents the unusual combination of humor, weary sophistication, and abjection that often marks the linguistic absurd.

When humans grapple with fundamental activities of sex and other bodily facts of life, language, or human relations, we may well find laughable nonsense. Even severe bodily violence takes on a valence of humor, as we see in both *Molloy* and Moran's violent encounters in the forest: When *Molloy* encounters a "charcoal-burner", a confused exchange quickly leads to a violent scene:

...when I made to go, he held me back by the sleeve. So I smartly freed a crutch and dealt him a good dint on the skull. That calmed him. The dirty old brute... Seeing he had not ceased to breathe I contented myself with giving him a few warm kicks in the ribs, with my heels (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 84).

The sardonic *Molloy* describes at some length his technique of swinging on his

¹Molloy errs slightly in his calculation; four farts every fifteen minutes would be slightly *more* than one fart every four minutes – around 1.07.

crutches before to deliver the blows to both sides of the body, for he “had a mania for symmetry.”

3.5 A Glimpse of Another Absurd

While the majority of Beckett’s technique in the trilogy focuses on elements most closely associated with the traditional linguistic absurd, we also become aware of an alternate logic at work, one that focuses on specificity rather than confusion, on pattern and structure rather than disorder, on reliable mechanism rather than unpredictable arbitrariness, and implicitly on an optimistic view rather than on depressing notions of squalor and decrepitude. In this alternate set of techniques we catch a first tentative step from the linguistic to the logical absurd, and for this reason Beckett’s trilogy is exquisitely suited for our interest in establishing continuity between the two absurs: The drama of Pinter and Beckett constituted the prototypical linguistic absurd; Beckett’s trilogy provides a first step on the bridge between the two; and later examples that fall more squarely into the logical absurd will allow us a more comprehensive analysis of that concept.

As with the linguistic absurd, we shall begin our consideration of the logical absurd by enumerating a set of techniques. Later, we will explore theory and philosophy that may add conceptual integration to these techniques.

3.5.1 The Absurdity of Detail

Our previous example of Molloy’s calculation of his rate of farting suggests Beckett’s propensity for considering certain seemingly unimportant elements in minute detail and at great length. A mundane subject elaborated in exasperating precision leave us with a sense of the absurd; this in a sense relates to the concept of proliferation from the linguistic absurd, but this technique takes on a different sensibility of precision rather than disorganization. Perhaps the most famous passage reflective of this technique involves Molloy’s careful and extremely prolonged grappling with the issue

of how to arrange his “sucking stones” to achieve an orderly pattern:

I took advantage of being at the seaside to lay in a store of sucking-stones. They were pebbles but I call them stones. Yes, on this occasion I laid in a considerable store. I distributed them equally among my four pockets, and sucked them turn and turn about. This raised a problem which I first solved in the following way. I had say sixteen stones, four in each of my four pockets these being the two pockets of my trousers and the two pockets of my greatcoat. Taking a stone from the right pocket of my greatcoat, and putting it in my mouth, I replaced it in the right pocket of my greatcoat by a stone from the right pocket of my trousers, which I replaced by a stone from the left pocket of my trousers, which I replaced by a stone from the left pocket of my greatcoat, which I replaced by the stone which was in my mouth, as soon as I had finished sucking it (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 69).

Through this technique, Molloy hopes to find a method for sucking all stones equally; this is no doubt another example of Molloy’s “mania for symmetry.” The passage extends preposterously over several pages, with Molloy alternately proposing new methods and then recognizing flaws: “For it did not escape me that, by an extraordinary hazard, the four stones circulating thus might always be the same four” (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 69). Molloy’s effort to devise a perfect a scheme to equalize exposure to all stones leaves the reader with a sense of amusement and exasperation. As a crowning blow, Molloy concedes that the problem does not matter: “And the solution to which I rallied in the end was to throw away all the stones but one, which I kept now in one pocket, now in another, and which of course I soon lost, or threw away, or gave away, or swallowed” (74). Through this excruciating passage, Beckett seems to imply that any topic can be reduced to meaninglessness through a sustained attention to minutiae.

3.5.2 Repetition, or Recurrence of Elements

Amidst the confusion and incoherence of the linguistic absurd, we also notice a prominent tendency towards repetition; throughout the trilogy many of the same ideas and objects reappear several time. But the trilogy's repetitious tendency differs significantly from that of Pinter's work: The latter focused on linguistic repetition that seems to imply an underlying weakness or exhaustion of language (Davies and Aston's vacuous exchange about Mick as a "joker," for example). Repetition in the trilogy, on the other hand, focuses more on the recurrence of elements; this technique may impart a certain weariness of repetition, certainly. But recurrence may also give rise to the notion of an underlying structure at work in the trilogy, an overall pattern to be uncovered or deciphered.

Examples of recurring elements are too numerous to catalog comprehensively, and one hesitates to include too many examples for fear of trivializing the discussion. But the following list should convey the pervasive role this technique plays in the trilogy. Examples of recurrence are organized into categories.

3.5.2.1 *Clothing and Accessories*

Among the novels of the trilogy we find recurrence of several items of clothing and accessories, including hats, an oft-mentioned greatcoat, boots, and clubs or sticks. For example, we find several citations of a hat attached to a string, as when Molloy discusses the clothing of one of the mysterious characters A or C, as well as his own:

But the hat, a town-hat, an old-fashioned town hat, which the least gust would carry far away. Unless it was attached under the chin, by means of a string or an elastic. I took off my hat and looked at it. It is fastened, it has always been fastened, to my buttonhole, always the same buttonhole, at all seasons by a long lace (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 13).

Moran too mentions his hat, which bears a striking resemblance to Molloy's in being attached under the chin:

But a word on the subject of my boater [a type of hat], before I begin. Two holes were bored in the brim, one on either side of course, I had bored them myself, with my little gimlet. And in these holes I had secured the ends of an elastic long enough to pass under my chin, under my jaws rather, but not too long, for it had to hold fast, under my jaws rather (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 126).

And Malone, in discussing the character Macmann, mentions a similar hat:

For coat and hat have this much in common, that whereas the coat is too big, the hat is too small. And though the edges of the split brim close on the brow like jaws of a trap, nevertheless the hat is attached, by a string, for safety, to the topmost button of the coat, because, never mind (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 228).

For now, we simply notice the recurrence of this item as an example of a broad trend of recurrence, without commenting on possible interpretations, which we shall discuss later.

subsubsection Physicality, Movement, Immobility

We have mentioned Beckett's attention to issues of impotence and abjection and that this is consistent with the ethos of the linguistic absurd. Throughout the trilogy we notice the recurrent mention of similar physical ailments that impede the movement of characters. Therefore, we have an interesting case in which the ailments themselves work very much in concert with other characteristics of the linguistic absurd, but the fact of their recurrence relates more closely to the logical absurd.

For example, Molloy discusses his leg pain and stiffness repeatedly and at some length:

And now my progress, slow and painful at all times, was more so than ever, because of my short stiff leg, the same which I thought had long been as stiff as a leg could be, but damn the bit of it, for it was growing stiffer than ever... (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 77).

Later, Moran also struggles with leg pain that will eventually render him almost immobile, reducing him to crawling and rolling in muck. Here we see the beginning of his encounter with this pain:

One night, having finally succeeded in falling asleep beside by son as usual, I woke with a start, feeling as if I had just been dealt a violent blow... I was about to conclude as usual that it was just another bad dream when a fulgurating pain when through my knee (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 138).

Malone too is totally immobilized, perhaps because of similar problems with his legs. Confined to his bed, he relies upon his stick to push and pull his food and chamber pots and to take inventory of his various possessions in the corner of his room.

Among these characters we discover certain common references to movement, as when both Molloy and Moran are reduced to crawling, rolling, or pulling themselves along amidst the muck of the forest (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 89, 91, 152). Malone, too, mentions this method of locomotion while discussing Macmann:

And sometimes you cannot, get to your feet I mean, and have to drag yourself to the nearest plot of vegetables, using the tufts of grass and asperities of the earth to drag yourself forward, or to the nearest clump of brambles..." (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 233).

Through these and other recurring references to physical ailments and immobility, our sense of pattern may be aroused, a sense which runs counter to the prevailing sense

of disorder and squalor imparted by the predominant characteristics of the linguistic absurd.

3.5.2.2 *Encounters*

Other examples of recurrence involve similar encounters among the three novels. Perhaps the most amusing of these involve encounters with older women in apparently prison-like or asylum-like settings, as mentioned in previous discussion of the theme of sexual impotence; Molloy's dalliances with Lousse and Macmann's laughably revolting sexual relations with Moll are two examples.

But perhaps the most salient and also the most unsettling (yet oddly humorous) of the recurring encounters involve confused and violent meetings in the forest. We saw above Molloy's description of his encounter with the "charcoal-burner", in which he deftly uses his crutch to incapacitate the stranger and then, in a "mania of symmetry," swings and kicks the other man to death. Moran experiences a similar encounter with a stranger in the forest:

I have an idea I told him once again to get out of my way. I can still see the hand coming towards me, pallid, opening and closing. As if self-propelled. I do not know what happened then. But a little later, perhaps a long time later, I found him stretched on the ground, his head in a pulp. I am sorry I cannot indicate more clearly how this result was obtained, it would have been something worth reading (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 89, 91, 1511)

Malone too, in waxing eloquent about the importance of his stick, alludes to a violent encounter: "...perhaps I was stunned with a blow, on the head, in a forest perhaps, yes, now that I speak of a forest I vaguely remember a forest (183). A later allusion reinforces the cryptic reference: "This club is mine, and that is all about it.

It is stained with blood, but insufficiently, insufficiently. I have defended myself, ill, but I have defended myself (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 249).

These recurrent references seem at once repellent in their violence, humorous in their outrageousness, and playful in their cryptic reference. They also seem to activate our sense of pattern or structure, though we may not immediately be able to construct an interpretation to make sense of them.

3.5.2.3 Other Examples

There are other examples of objects that recur in peculiar ways: bicycles, the sea, the characters' interest in drawing up a list of possessions... and a grey hen, among others. Moran mentions his grey hen more than once:

And I, not to be outdone, told him how worried I was about my hens, particularly my grey hen, which would neither brood nor lay for the past month and more had done nothing but sit with her arse in the dust (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 101).

Later, Malone also mentions the grey hen, and we sense that Beckett is playfully crafting a hint or suggestion, though the meaning of the hint seems far from clear: "It was a grey hen, perhaps *the* grey hen" (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 203, emphasis added). "But often the grey hen came alone, or one of the grey hens if you prefer, for that is a thing that will never be known, though it might well have been, without much trouble" (204).

If we are disposed to discover a rational explanation for these recurrences, we might posit them as clues indicating a sameness of these characters, despite their different names; perhaps Molloy and Moran represent the same character, for example. But the evidence seems far too imperfect to support the conclusion, at least fully. For example, there are other points to support the idea of separate characters, as when Moran describes the "Molloy country" as distinct from his own:

By the Molloy country I mean that narrow region whose administrative limits he had never crossed and presumably never would, either because he was forbidden to, or because he had no wish to, or of course because of some extraordinary conjunction of circumstances. This region was situated in the north, I mean in relation to mine, less bleak... (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 133).

While apparently not dispositive, recurring hints also may leave us with the impression at least of a relationship among the principle characters of Molloy, Moran, Malone, and The Unnameable; perhaps these represent the same character, or overlapping identities. But the more general point, for our consideration of the logical absurd, is that recurrence holds out the prospect of resolution, even if it is elusive. With our sense of pattern activated, our reading acquires a new sense of structure, an underlying dimension of order, as we notice recurrences and try to fit them into a sensible scheme.

3.5.3 Overall Structure

These recurrences, together with other suggestions faint or strong, work to suggest a certain cyclical or repetitive structure to the trilogy as a whole. Early on, Molloy plants in our minds the suggestion of a cyclical retelling: “This time, then once more I think, then perhaps a last time, then I think it’ll be over, with that world too” (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 8). Alongside the recurrences we have already seen, this early suggestion acquires even greater power: As we encounter new instances of recurrence, we begin to wonder if they indicate an overall repetition at work. Are Molloy and Moran indeed separate characters in a quarry/seeker relation, or might they somehow be different aspects of the same character? It seems unlikely that we will ever find dispositive evidence either way, but the persistent implications nonetheless establish the notion of an overall repetitive structure, and it is this aspect which seems most

important as an aspect of the logical absurd.

Part two of *Molloy*, which constitutes Moran's story, also suggests a certain circularity in its beginning and ending sentences. Beginning with the words "It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows" (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 92), the section ends with Moran sitting down to begin writing his recounting of the very tale we have been reading. His final words evoke the initial ones, only to rebut them: "Then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining" (176). This seems an exemplary combination of linguistic and logical absurd, at once offering both contradiction and suggesting underlying structure.

In *Samuel Beckett: Anatomy of a Literary Revolution*, Pascale Casanova writes that the conventional view of Beckett's work focuses on its apparent commentary on existential and linguistic meaninglessness. We will soon see that Casanova rejects this view, but first let us understand better this traditional view; in doing so we will also review, with Casanova, some philosophical underpinnings of the linguistic absurd. We need not do this exhaustively; our aim is only to establish its importance to Casanova's thought and its resonance with the characteristics of the linguistic absurd we have already seen.

The concept of the linguistic absurd, with its focus on the indeterminacy of language and the elusiveness of meaning, has roots in the early ideas of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. From these early beginnings, in which Saussure separated sign/signifier/signified and referent, we can see the development over the course of the twentieth century of a theoretical crisis of language and meaning, as these components drift ever farther. Given the work of later theorists who built on Saussurean foundations, such as Lacan, Blanchot, and Derrida, we are ultimately left in a state of postmodern confusion, uncertain exactly how determinate meaning is possible through a linguistic mechanism which seems at every turn to militate against

it.

Casanova singles out the writer/philosopher Maurice Blanchot as the main proponent of the “linguistic absurdist” interpretation of Beckett’s work and aims to overturn this view. Blanchot’s views are vast, but his discussion of the difference between everyday language and literary language help us to understand the view against which Casanova reacts. Everyday language ignores the philosophical problems raised by the distance between referent and sign and between signifier and signified:

Everyday language calls a cat a cat, as if the living cat and its name were identical, as if it were not true that when we name the cat, we retain nothing of it but its absence, what it is not. Yet for a moment everyday language is right, in that even if the word excludes the existence of what it designates, it still refers to it through the thing’s nonexistence, which has become its essence (Blanchot, 325).

But literary language, on the other hand, focuses and even revels in this distance:

... literary language is made of uneasiness; it is also made of contradictions. Its position is not very stable or secure. On the one hand, its only interest in a thing is the meaning of the thing, its absence, and it would like to attain this absence absolutely in itself and for itself, to grasp in its entirety the infinite movement of comprehension. What is more, it observes that the word “cat” is not only the nonexistence of the cat but a nonexistence made word, that is, a completely determined and objective reality. It sees that there is a difficulty and even a lie in this (Blanchot, 325).

Thus Blanchot’s view of literary language focuses on uneasiness, contradiction, insecurity, instability, absence, infinity, unreality – aspects which are consonant with

the characteristics we have outlined for the linguistic absurd. Blanchot, an early supporter of Beckett, cites approvingly in a commentary on *The Unnameable* the following passage, which creates an image of free-floating, ungrounded words:

You don't feel your mouth any more, no need of a mouth, the words are everywhere, inside me, outside of me. . . I hear them, no need to hear them, no need of a head, impossible to stop them, impossible to stop, I'm in words, made of words, others' words, what others, the whole world is here with me, I'm in the air, the walls, the walled-in one, everything yields, opens, ebbs, flows, like flakes. I'm all these flakes, meeting mingling, falling asunder, wherever I go I find me, leave me, go towards me, come from me, nothing ever but me, a particle of me, retrieved, lost, gone astray, I'm all these words, all these strangers, this dust of words, with no ground for their settling, no sky for their dispersing, coming together to say, fleeing one another to say, that I am they, all of them, those that merge, those that part, those that never meet (quote from *The Unnameable*, cited in Haase 82).

Casanova believes this Blanchotian view overlooks important formalist and structural tendencies of Beckett's work. Upon first reading, we may be so scandalized by the rambling, confused, and bizarre text (which we have analyzed under the notion of linguistic absurd) that we fail to notice other aspects (which we have collected under the rubric of logical absurd). Writing of Beckett's *Westward Ho*, a novel with some similar characteristics to the trilogy, Casanova says:

A first reading of *Westward Ho*, it is true, conveys the impression of a discourse that fades out in a kind of paratactic inarticulation. Beckett had seemingly never gone so far in the direction of hermeticism and literal

obscurity. But the power of critical bias precludes observing and understanding Beckett's project as it unfolds in this text. If we overturn the prejudice of non-meaning and confusion associated with Beckett's writing, we can bring out strict rules of composition and organization (Casanova 16).

In other words, in opposition to the idea of Beckett's work as paradigmatically focused on "non-meaning and confusion," we also have the suggestion of "strict rules of composition and organization," the idea of a work that is constructed "precisely as an algorithm, a generative formula" (Casanova 16).

I believe Casanova articulates an important aspect of Beckett's work, though in my opinion she may react too strongly against the received wisdom concerning Beckett's work and thus overstate the importance of its structural aspects. It seems certain that both tendencies are present in the trilogy, and it is this juxtaposition that fascinates; and this juxtaposition makes the trilogy especially valuable to us as we develop our concepts of linguistic and logical absurd. The trilogy offers both the confused babbling, existential despair, and humor of the abject alongside hints of a structural specificity guiding the text and offering us a humorous and playful hints at what this structure might be.

3.5.4 Humor of The Two Absurds

To conclude our discussion of the logical absurdist aspects of the trilogy, we consider the humor of this dimension, quite different in sensibility from that of the linguistic absurd. In discussing the latter, we saw a farcically dark humor that was sometimes sexual and scatological, and often focused on impotence, disability, and immobility. This humor seems consonant with the broad notions of the linguistic absurd: confusion, contradiction, failed communication, unstable identities, and arbitrariness. The humor of the logical absurd appears to issue from a wholly different source that may

be more challenging to identify.

One source of humor may relate to our previous suggestion of the logical absurd's obsession with detail; recall Molloy's protracted "sucking stones" passage, which provokes exasperation as well as (perhaps) laughter – or perhaps laughter in part *because of* exasperation. With such techniques, Beckett taps into the humor of the out-of-control, comic because it threatens to overwhelm meaningful with its preposterous proliferation. Perhaps this harkens back to Henri Bergson's suggestion of humor as issuing from "the mechanical encrusted on something living." Molloy's obsessive focus on exhausting the combinatorial possibilities, on considering ad nauseam possible algorithms to solve his preposterous issue seems both to provoke and to amuse. In the book *Machine-Age Comedy*, Michael North perceives this very sort of humor at work in Beckett's writing. He suggests that the mechanical or algorithmic aspects of Beckett's writing create comedy out of that which is essentially dry:

... the machinations of Beckett's texts generate possibility out of repetition not by overcoming it or undermining it but rather by pushing it to an extralogical conclusion. It is the emergence of that kind of irrationality from the very gearbox of reason that makes Beckett's works such powerful examples of machine-age comedy (North 162).

Another facet of the humor of the logical absurd may come from the recurrence we cited previously, which may take on a sense of arbitrariness. With the linguistic absurd, we noted that Beckett exhibited a certain authorial arbitrariness, exposing an ambivalence about certain details: "They knew each other perhaps. Now in any case they do, now I think they will know each other" (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 9); "Sapo had no friends – no, that won't do ¶ Sapo was on good terms with his little friends, though they did not exactly love him" (123). This type of ambivalence telegraphs a certain message of futility and pointlessness to the reader, as if Beckett wants to

say “It doesn’t matter, this way or that.” But the recurrence of items throughout the trilogy may suggest another type of arbitrariness more closely related to logical absurd. The repeated mention of a hat attached by a string to a greatcoat might create in us a sense of pointlessly repeated trivia, a sort of absurdism of meaningless detail. But if we conceive of this kind of recurrence part of a larger structural agenda, perhaps we then understand it not as pointless detail but as purposeful structural ballast. As part of an overall algorithmic scheme, we may find the repetition less perplexing and more humorous – or perhaps simply perplexing and humorous for different reasons.

As we saw, such recurrence of items exposes (or at least hints at) an underlying pattern or structure in the trilogy: Perhaps the characters of the trilogy are the same or overlap significantly, and the novels themselves composed of structural repetition. To some extent, such a possibility represents an element of nonsense embedded within the text – nonsense not in the sense of slapstick but rather in the sense of non-signifying material.

Perhaps our previous discussion of humor as issuing from a rift or disparity helps explain the humor of such material; when we discover a latent structure underneath the text’s manifest linguistic meaning, the unexpected discovery of such hidden foreignness creates a comic effect.

Returning to Camus and the philosophical absurd, I think Camus would recognize and appreciate both types of absurdity in the work of Beckett; the two absconds seem to suggest two sides of his philosophy. The linguistic absurd relates closely to metaphysical and existential despair; after all, it is for the connection to this aspect of Camus that Esslin coined the phrase “Theater of the Absurd.” One can imagine Camus in confrontation with the linguistic absurd of Beckett’s trilogy, feeling an emotional resonance with the despair and exhaustion. But he also might appreciate the features of the logical absurd, finding interest in a growing awareness of pattern

and structure undergirding the work. He might even find a temporary respite from his existential crisis in the possible order and resolution offered by this structure, though of course it could never substitute for metaphysical truth. But he would certainly appreciate the novel's hints at proliferation, its stubborn insistence to continue, as succinctly expressed by *The Unnameable*: "I can't go on, I'll go on" (Beckett, *Molloy etc.*, 414).

In the next chapter we shall see further examples of the logical absurd; these will help us shape this notion, which will be essential to our understanding of the digital absurd.

CHAPTER IV

THE LOGICAL ABSURD

As we move towards a closer consideration of the logical absurd, we are crossing a conceptual inflection point between two varieties of the absurd. This inflection point should not be seen as a rupture but rather a gradual movement along a continuum between two extremes. At one extreme, Pinter's plays present us with relatively strong examples of the linguistic absurd; Beckett's trilogy moved us along the continuum, displaying strong characteristics of the linguistic absurd but also providing us with a glimpse of the logical absurd. As we move across the point of inflection, we will begin to explore the dominance of the logical absurd, though we may too see recessive traits of linguistic absurd alongside it.

A brief review of the two types of absurd we have seen thus far may help us regroup before delving into a new work. In Pinter's drama and Beckett's trilogy, we saw a number of characteristics that we grouped under the rubric of linguistic absurd, including:

- Emphasis on failure of communication
- Repetition that highlights misunderstanding
- Proliferation of language, babbling
- Confusion of names and identity
- Contradiction
- Emphasis on squalor and death, often in humor
- Arbitrariness of narrative

In Beckett's work, we found also a set of characteristics that suggested a different type of absurd, which we grouped under the rubric of logical absurd:

- Exasperating focus on detail
- Repetition in the sense of recurrence of ideas or objects
- Suggestion of underlying structure
- Humor of structure or rift

Based on this still incomplete framework, we begin to sense distinctions between these two absurd sensibilities. A key difference involves the overtness of approach; the features of the linguistic absurd seem more readily observable than the logical absurd, attracting attention to themselves in many ways. The logical absurd, on the other hand, may be less immediately apparent, relying on subtler structural techniques and methods such as algorithmic manipulation, mathematical structuring (combinatoric arrangement of narrative elements, for example), logical operations (contradiction, negation, paradox), or geometric arrangement. Though the rule is not without exception, we generalize in saying that the logical absurd recedes into the work while the linguistic absurd displays itself openly.

Before considering our first example of the logical absurd, we pause to consider a point of historical connection between these two aspects of absurdity.

4.1 Historical Connections 1: 'Pataphysics

The writer Alfred Jarry stands as a singular character in experimental French literature of the late nineteenth century. His work is scandalous, bizarre, exceptional, and sometimes brilliant; in his oeuvre we find oddly juxtaposed the vulgar and monstrous(ly funny) Pa Ubu of the Ubu Cycle; the dry technical explication of "How to Construct a Time Machine"; and the imaginative and hallucinatory scientific voyages

of *Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll*, 'Pataphysician. For Jarry, the neologism "pataphysics" captured this curious mix of science, poetry, humor, and fantasy. 'Pataphysics has been described by Jarry and others as "the science of imaginary solutions" and a field which rests "on the truth of contradictions and exceptions" (Jarry, *Selected Works*, 193). We need not dig too deeply into the notion of 'pataphysics to understand it as a connecting point between science and mathematics on one hand, and literature and fantasy on the other.

The College of 'Pataphysics, founded in Paris in 1948, brought together artists and writers interested in Jarry's concept of 'pataphysics. The group's unusual mixture of scientists and mathematicians with writers and poets reflects the unusual juxtaposition of ideas in Jarry's original concept. On one hand, the group included members such as the mathematician writer Raymond Queneau and the scientist Francois Le Lionnais; on the other hand, writers more closely associated with literature (experimental or absurdist literature in particular) such as Jean Genet and Eugene Ionesco were counted as members.

For our purposes, we choose not to delve into Jarry's literary work or the history of the College; rather, we simply acknowledge the legacy of 'pataphysics as an early connecting point for the concepts we seek to develop. The works we now consider under the rubric of logical absurd can be seen as inheritors of 'pataphysics' unusual combination of science and language, number and letter, seriousness and play, craft and humor.

4.2 *Impressions of Impressions of Africa*

Written by Raymond Roussel and published in 1910, *Impressions of Africa* displays characteristics consonant in many ways with Jarry's work. *Impressions of Africa* tells the story of a group of unusual passengers shipwrecked and held for ransom in an African country. Though this short summary captures the novel's framing story, it



Figure 6: Conceptual Map from Linguistic to Logical Absurd: Roussel

is also misleading: like many works with a strong element of the absurd, the specifics of the narrative seem rather secondary. The novel's structure and texture, evoked as we encounter its language, characters, and details, are of overriding importance. Perhaps the novel is better described as an arrangement of mini-narratives and unusual characters loosely woven around the framing story of the shipwreck.

The first half of the book takes the reader somewhat off-guard, plunging immediately into the beginning of a bizarre celebration, an explanation of which is not offered until much later. Initially we understand only that the celebration takes place in an African nation and marks the coronation of a regent named Talu VII as Emperor of Ponukele and King of Drelshkaf. The celebration consists of a relatively rapid succession of performances, some reminiscent of circus freak-shows, others featuring bizarre contraptions or inventions enabling amazing feats; some created by the members of the "Imponderables Theater", others performed by local African tribesmen. We the reader do not understand the significance of these various spectacles until much later in the book.

The strangeness of these performances perhaps issues from their rapid-fire variety combined with the lack of coherent explanation. It is difficult to impart the strangeness of these performances in traditional prose, but following snippets summarizing several of the scenes may capture something of this strangeness:

Table 1: *Impressions of Africa* Summary Snippets (created with a very basic constraining rule)

1. King Yaour IX's corpse, dressed in a pink woolen gown, the costume of Faust's Marguerite
2. Emperor Talu dressed as a music-hall singer in a blue dress with a long train
3. branding the soles of the prisoner Mossem's foot with the text of Sirdah's death certificate
4. Rul, killed with her prized golden pins injected through the eyelets of her elegant corset
5. traitor Gaiz Duh beheaded by the Emperor's son Rao, without a single drop of blood
6. a tame magpie creating animated vignettes with Louise Montalescot's several statues using only its beak
7. a replica of the Paris Bourse, in which stocks determine the value of each Incomparable
8. the Bucharessas family freak show: juggling, cats playing Prisoner's Base, imitations, shower of gold coins
9. Balbet the marksman shooting the white off a soft-boiled egg using an old Gras rifle
10. the undefeatable fencing machine built by La Billaudiere-Maisonnial, vanquishing Balbet with its many unpredictable moves
11. using a dead rodent's viscous secretion, Rhejed lures a giant bird for a fantastic journey
12. with his discovery bexium, Bex creates an automatic orchestra by mechanizing sounds of musical instruments

13. Bex demonstrates the opposing physical effects of magnetine and impervium by attracting various precious materials
14. the Hungarian Skariofsky supervising a trained worm creating music by dropping heavy water on strings
15. the Emperor Talu singing Daricelli's Aubade in falsetto, receiving instruction from the singer from Marseilles
16. the paraplegic Tancred Bucharessas performing a majestic overture with multiple instruments despite his physical limitations
17. the singer Ludovic performing the well-known Frere Jacques as a round, singing all sections himself
18. Philippo presented as a "talking-head" to spectators, thanks to his normal head and tiny body
19. the Breton Lelgoualch, an amputee who played a special flute crafted from his missing tibia
20. Urbain the circus rider and his talking horse Romulus, repeating words, sentences, fables, proverbs, etc
21. the clown Whirligig constructing a three-part ecclesiastical scene from copper coins, dominos, and playing cards
22. the Belgian tenor Cuijper, who amplified his voice to superhuman levels with his "Cuijper's Speaker"
23. the Italian dramatic actress Adinolfi declaiming in Italian the sorrowful verse of the poet Tasso
24. Carmichael announcing historical scenes suggested by the historian Juillard and acted by the play-actor Soreau
25. the famous composer Handel composing the theme of his oratorio, Vesper, by a mechanical process

26. the old and corpulent Latvian ballerina Chervonenkova, attempting to perform the "Dance of the Nymph"
27. Carmichael performing the Jeruka's last verse, the Battle of the Tez, but forgetting a word
28. Bashku the witch doctor restoring sight to the Emperor's daughter Sirdah in the river Tez
29. the sculptor Fuxier's pastilles, thrown into the river, create remarkable artistic scenes in the water
30. Fuxier's specially designed fireworks that depict in bursts of light the wealthy Argentinean named Ballesteros
31. Jizme being subjected to the torture of waiting to die by electrocution in a storm
32. the hypnotist Darriand projects images from the past, thereby restoring memory to young Seil Kor
33. the recovered final scene from *Romeo and Juliet*, staged with additions from Shakespeare's original manuscript
34. Fuxier's cluster of evocative grapes, rapidly grown with heat and chemicals, showing historical scenes within
35. Fogar entering a comatose state, letting him walk the ocean floor and discover exotic creatures
36. Louise Montalescot's automatic arm gliding over the page, drawing a street scene of busy passers-by

Only much later do we gain any contextualized understanding of these scenes, and indeed the primary structure of the book involves the stark division of the novel into two distinct parts: In the first part we are exposed to the retinue of rather bizarre scenes and characters mentioned above, while the second half explains the provenance

of these unusual spectacles, when the shipwrecked group of foreigners were captured by King Talu and became involved in his coronation celebration. Because of the associations between the spectacles of the first part and the contextualized story of the second part, a relationship of delayed explanation is created between the two parts of the book. (Perhaps explanation is too strong a word: the story still retains significant bizarreness, which we will explore further.) For example, we see in part one the stage actor Soreau posing in a tableau vivant involving the blind composer Handel writing seemingly random notes onto a stair rail:

...the entire scene was taken up by a staircase which wound upward and was lost among the rafters... Half-way up, an old blind man, in mid-eighteenth-century costume, appeared facing us, at a turn in the staircase, in the process of descending. In his left hand he held a dark bunch of greenery, consisting of a number of sprigs of holly... With a goose quill which he held in his free hand, the blind man was writing on the balustrade to his right, which, by reason of its flat rail and pale colour, offered a convenient smooth surface... Pointing at the stage with his finger, Carmichael addressed these words to the audience: 'Handel composing the theme of his oratorio, Vesper, by a mechanical process' (Roussel, *Impressions*, 79)

Much later in the book, we gain at least some context for this unusual scene. To relieve boredom while waiting to be ransomed, and to contribute to Emperor Talu's coronation celebration, the passengers on the shipwrecked boat decided to stage a performance, calling themselves the "Theater of the Incomparables." For his performance, Soreau took as inspiration five stories he had collected in the course of travels in North America, England, Russia, Greece, and Italy. In England, Soreau had learned about Handel's life and borrowed the vignette from *Memories of Handel* by Lord Cornfield, an intimate friend of the great composer. The scene turned on an argument about the nature of creative genius and developed in this way:

In 1756, Handel, who was then an old man and had already been blind for more than four years, rarely went out of his London house, where crowds of his admirers visited him.

One evening the eminent musician was in his study on the first floor, a huge, luxurious room which he preferred to the ground-floor apartments because of a magnificent organ, set against one of the panels.

Under the bright lights, a number of guests were chatting noisily, enlivened by a sumptuous meal with which the master, a great lover of delicate food and good wine, had entertained them.

Lord Cornfield, who was among those present, turned the conversation on the the genius of their host and praised his masterpieces with the sincerest enthusiasm. The others chorused their agreement, and each expressed his admiration for that inborn creative gift which no ordinary man could acquire even at the cost of the most assiduous labor.

Cornfield maintained that a phrase sprung from a brow illuminated by divine spark, developed by a mere technician in however mediocre a fashion could breathe life into many pages of music. On the other hand, added the speaker, an ordinary theme treated by the most inspired mind must inevitably remain heavy and clumsy and never lose the inevitable mark of its origin.

Handel protested these words, claiming that he would undertake to write a whole oratorio worthy to be included in the list of his works, on a theme which had been mechanically constructed by accidental procedure.

To summarize the technique: Handel arranged for his guests to choose randomly from various sprigs of holly, each of which represented a different note. For each note chosen, Handel wrote it on the balustrade of his staircase, one note for each step, and thus produced a 23-note phrase. This phrase formed the core of Handel's famous Vesper oratorio.

4.2.1 Vestiges of a Receding Linguistic Absurd

Within these early observations of the novel, we can locate certain elements that fit comfortably within our notion of the linguistic absurd. The “freak show” nature of many of the novel’s scenes – a talking horse, a worm playing a musical instrument, a paraplegic one-man band – certainly impart a sense of strangeness that Pinter and Beckett might appreciate (though their more minimalistic works never feature such flamboyant oddities). And perhaps more important, our sense of confusion, uncertainty, or dislocation deriving from these uncontextualized scenes is a familiar feeling from the linguistic absurd. Throughout the first part of the novel, this feeling reigns as we are subjected to a barrage of oddities and a lack of overall sense.

But though there are some similarities, it would be mistaken to equate the strangeness of Roussel with that of Pinter and Beckett; through the differences in these kinds of strangeness we hope further to articulate the two varieties of absurd. Beckett’s trilogy showed a preponderance of evident strangeness, combined with a faint suggestion of underlying structure, giving us a glimpse of what we have called the logical absurd. Roussel’s work seems a kind of inverse: a strong suggestion of underlying structure, along with only the vestiges of a more overt linguistic absurd.

A major difference between Pinter and Beckett’s linguistic absurd and the sensibility we derive from Roussel involves failure: Where Beckett and Pinter have strong components of failure (of language, of body, of mind, of identity), Roussel’s work avoids such a sensibility of abjection. Given access to early drafts of *Impressions of Africa*, Roussel scholar Mark Ford suggests that Roussel deliberately sought to cleanse the work of the aura of failure, and in this sense he removed a prominent element of linguistic absurd. For example, in drafts of the novel, several of the Incomparables fail miserably in their performances: The Juillard character, an academic expert in history and literature, presents an interminable, insufferable lecture which both bores and enrages his audience, bringing them to riotous rejection of his presentation; in

the final version, in contrast, Juillard's brilliant and extensive speech on the Electors of Brandenburg is received by a rapt audience. Ford asserts:

Roussel's painstaking reworkings of his material reveal a general overall trend: not only does he gradually eliminate vaudevillian mishaps and crude stereotypes, but he makes almost everyone a success. In the final version, only the the overweight Latvian ballerina, Olga Cherwonenkoff, really fails in the course of the gala, and even she offers glimpses of her former talent (Ford 101)

This is in remarkable contrast to Pinter's inept communicators and Beckett's laughably impotent characters.

There is also evidence that Roussel knew that his novel's order of presentation might seem incomprehensible to some readers, presenting a first section of extended, unexplained freak shows and bizarre spectacles. Early copies of *Impressions of Africa* show that Roussel attempted to soften the impact by including an insert asking readers to change their approach: "Readers not initiated into the art of Raymond Roussel are advised to read this book from page 212 to page 455, and then from page 1 to page 211" (Ford 103).

Ford continues his observations on the subdued nature of the manifest absurd in Roussel's work, observing that his narratives are not "fissured by telling gaps or ellipses, or complicated by suppressed details: on the contrary, all aspects of the given situation are presented with exemplary thoroughness" (Ford xxii). This contrasts markedly with Beckett's willfully abstruse reflections and ambiguous hints dropped into his work. Pushing the point further, Ford cites Robbe-Grillet, whose analysis of Roussel suggested his works are in fact characterized by a "total transparency, which leaves neither shadow nor reflection behind it" (Ford xxii). While we might expect such clarity to reduce the feeling of strangeness, the opposite seems to happen

(and this phenomenon is essential in the distinction between linguistic and logical absurd). Robbe-Grillet puts it well: “Roussel’s ‘transparency’ is of the sort that does not resolve mystery, but creates it” (Ford xxii). We shall seek to understand how this strangeness is produced, and in this we shall seek to elaborate further the notion of the logical absurd.

4.2.2 Emergence of the Logical Absurd

Alongside this diminished linguistic absurd we find elements of an invigorated logical absurd. In the stone-sucking scene of Beckett’s *Molloy*, we saw an example of the absurdity of detail, in which Molloy explored in exasperating detail all strategies for sucking 16 stones in the most equitable manner possible. Roussel’s extended descriptions of unusual scenes and bizarre inventions share a certain kinship of exasperation with Molloy’s scene; we might consider the first half of the book as an extended example of this sensibility, as we feel a sense of exasperating absurdity in the detailed descriptions of the Incomparables’ inventions. These descriptions include:

- Bex’s automatic orchestra machine (5 pages)
- Bex’s enormous pencils and buttons, controlled in a highly choreographed show by his discovered substances impervium and magnetine (7 pages)
- Fogar’s display of bizarre creatures with amazing properties (15 pages)
- Louise Montalescot’s automatic painting and sketching machine: (10 pages)

In many cases these descriptions are highly detailed, offering complex description of the minute workings of imaginary machines. Even within a more holistic context, these descriptions would seem hard to bear, but in the decontextualized environment of the novel’s first section, they can seem a lengthy exercises in unmotivated, pointless detail (though it is still entertaining in a sense, perhaps even because of the preposterousness of the insufferable elaboration).

In addition to this relentless and exhaustive detail, the element of recurrence plays a role here, though not to the same extent as in the two previous works. The novel's two main parts broadly constitute a repetition – the first part a recounting of the Incomparables' performance, the second offering a more contextualized explanation of the scenes from part one. At first glance, this repetition seems more straightforward than the recurrence of elements in Beckett's trilogy – the forest, the hat and string, the injured leg – which seemed to be hinting cryptically at a larger, unknown structure governing the appearance of those elements, almost as Beckett's way of dropping hints.

But aside from the elements of exhaustive detail and repetition, a deeper aspect of the logical absurd emerges as we learn more about the novel's structure and method. As Ford suggested, Roussel's clarity of language actually *fails* to provide us with a sense of resolution and certainty; in fact, we come away from the novel with an unfailing sense of strangeness. One wonders how Roussel came to choose the oddities, scenes, and inventions of the novel, and no matter how clearly these are described, they still provoke a sense of the bizarre. We may begin to understand where this strangeness issues from by examining Roussel's technique, into which Roussel himself provided a great deal of insight. Before he committed suicide, Roussel left instructions for a posthumous publication of *How I Wrote Certain Of My Books*, in which he explained some of the techniques that guided his bizarre verbal creations. One technique involved choosing a common two-word phrase in which each word has multiple meanings; by purposely adopting a less common meaning for each individual word, the phrase takes on a less probable interpretation and ignites a “creative spark” around which to construct a mini-narrative. In Roussel's words:

I would choose a word and then link it to another by the preposition a;
and these two words, when considered in relation to meanings other than
their initial meaning, supplied me with a further creation. . . (Ford 2)

For example, the common phrase *maison a espagnolettes* (*maison* meaning “building”; *espangolettes* meaning “window latches”; so, “house with window latches”) became, in the less common interpretation, the basis for an episode in *Impressions of Africa* about a ruling dynasty (*maison* in the sense of “royal house or dynasty”) descended from twin Spanish girls (*espangolettes* meaning “Spanish girls”). This provides the kernel of the story of the patriarch Suan and two Spanish girls stranded in Ejur after a previous shipwreck, Suan’s marriage to both girls, and their simultaneous births of two sons, giving rise to the warring factions led by Talu and Yaour. In the adoption of this quasi-algorithmic process, Roussel plants the seeds of a sort of technical absurdity, borne of the application of algorithm to language.

Another of Roussel’s techniques involved beginning with a phrase adopted from conversation, news, novels, or other common sources and playing on similarity of sounds within the phrase to create a new, unexpected phrase. For example, a line from a Victor Hugo novel is massaged phonetically by Roussel to become the basis for one of the tableaux vivant:

1. Un vase tout rempli du vin de l’esperance
(a glass filled with the wine of hope)
2. ...sept houx rampe lit ... Vesper
(seven hollies balustrade read ... Vesper) (Roussel, *How I Wrote*, xix)

This phrase became the basis for Roussel’s tale mentioned above of Handel using seven bunches of holly tied with different colored ribbons to compose, on a banister, the principal theme of his oratorio Vesper.

Perhaps the best known example of Roussel’s technique in *Impressions of Africa* is the sentence “Les lettres du blanc sur les bandes du vieux billard” (the white letters [letters of the alphabet, written in white chalk] on the cushions of the old billiard table). The change of a single letter, *billard* (billiard table) to *pillard* (plunderer),

alters the sense of the sentence radically to “Les lettres du blanc sur les bandes du vieux pillard” (letters written by a white man about the hordes of an old plunderer). Later, this would become the basis for the framing story of *Impressions of Africa*: a group of white French people captured by the tribe of the old plunderer Talu.

Roussel’s explanations of method may partially satisfy our need to understand, but they leave us still uncertain, still baffled by the absolute strangeness of the work. Ford captures this feeling of alternating explanation and obfuscation, saying that the method “appears to have satisfied Roussel’s need for his writing to be linguistically self-fulfilling, like a solvable puzzle, and yet to disclose nothing of its purpose or origins; it allows a private compulsion to be gratified without having openly to declare itself” (Ford 4). In other words, Roussel gives us a key of sorts, but the more we explore and question, we realize its inability to answer our more fundamental questions. Ford continues: “Indeed, wholly characteristically, although the essay [*How I Wrote Certain Of My Books*] appears initially to explain everything, one eventually comes to realize that the revelations offered in it make Roussel’s writing seem more rather than less problematic” (Ford 6). Could this interpretation provide us with generalizable insight into the strangeness of the logical absurd?

4.2.3 Foucault’s Interpretation

In *Death and the Labyrinth*, Michel Foucault expands on the idea that Roussel’s language, while on one level clear and precise, can also create a strangeness of another sort. In outlining his method and presenting a kind of key to his work, Roussel introduces a level of uncertainty over possible underlying structures and messages within the text. As Foucault says, “The idea of a key, as soon as it is formulated, eludes its promise, or rather takes it beyond what it can deliver to a point where all of Roussel’s language is placed in question” (Foucault 8). In light of Roussel’s explanations, how are we now to understand the bizarre spectacles we encounter –

simply as unusual spectacles, as we see in the first part of the book; or as part of a more coherent story, as in the second; or as mere manifestations of the underlying structure and method, where the true meat and pith lie? Foucault again:

The scenes performed on stage at the Theater of the Incomparables . . . have an apparent narrative explanation – an event, a legend, a memory, or a book – which justifies the episodes; but the real key – or in any case, another key at a more profound level – opens the text in all its force and reveals, beneath its marvels, the muffled phonetic explosion of arbitrary sentences (Foucault 9).

The uneasiness that Foucault suggests issues from the uncomfortable play of two levels: on the surface we read clear (if unusual) descriptions of images and spectacles, but at a deeper level of language Roussel makes us aware of another system at work, a structural practice that seems at orthogonal to normal linguistic understanding. Roussel's bizarre language manipulations, while interesting and impressive, also create uneasiness as we try to incorporate awareness of them into our understanding of the text, for his explanation is inevitably incomplete and leaves us wondering. Of Roussel's work, Foucault suggests that

there is no doubt it is deceptive: by giving us a key to explain the work, it poses a second enigma. It dictates an uneasy awareness for the reading of the work: a restless awareness since the secret cannot be found in the riddles and charades that Roussel was so fond of. . . He forces the reader to learn a secret that he had not recognized and to feel trapped in an anonymous, amorphous, now-you-see-it-now-you-don't, never really demonstrable type of secret (Foucault 5).

Or perhaps more succinctly:

By giving a ‘solution’ he turns each word into a possible trap, which is the same as a real trap, since the mere possibility of a false bottom opens, for those who listen, a space of infinite uncertainty (Foucault 11).

This is inspired thinking where the logical absurd is concerned: It points to the feeling of confusion, uneasiness, or alienation that can emerge from encounters with a submerged, nonsignifying structure embedded within a work. It is not the overt absurd of Pinter and Beckett; its hallmarks are not the manifest preposterousness of Pinter and Beckett, but rather subtle, submerged detail and structure. Foucault speaks of the smoothness of words that cover a submerged danger and doubt:

In the reading, his works promise nothing. There’s only an inner awareness that by reading the words, so smooth and aligned, we are exposed to the unalloyed danger of reading other words which are both different and the same. His work as a whole, supported by *How I Wrote Certain of My Books* and all the undermining doubts sown by that text, systematically imposes a formless anxiety, diverging and yet centrifugal, directed not toward the most withheld secrets but toward the imitation and the transmutation of the most visible forms: each word at the same time energized and drained, filled and emptied by the possibility of there being yet another meaning, this one or that one, or neither one nor the other, but a third, or none (Foucault 13).

The slipperiness of meaning Foucault suggests might seem akin to the uncertainty unleashed over a century of continental linguistic theory. It seems unnecessary to elaborate this history here, from the early work of Saussure in separating the signifier and signified to the Derrida’s postmodern theory of the empty signifier. We only need to note the similar feeling of Foucault seems to indicate; yet it seems to issue from a different source. Linguistics theorized a slipperiness of language and meaning

based on the uneasy relations of components of language; the linguistic absurd comes from within language. Foucault hints at an aporia based on the uneasy relations between a surface of language and an underlying structure or algorithm. This uneasy relationship leaves us grasping for explanation and meaning in our encounter with such an unusually constructed work.

4.2.4 Grasping for Explanation

One such “grasping” reaction might involve a search for a more comprehensive underlying explanation, some greater understanding of why Roussel presents us with such oddities. Though Roussel has provided us with a sort of key, as Foucault said, this key serves not to quell our anxiety but rather to increase it; even with Roussel’s explication of method, one comes away from the book feeling a lack of holistic and satisfying understanding. In *Impressions of Africa*, even though the second part offers some explanation of the unusual scenes of the first half, we are still left wondering if there is some structure that governs the appearance of certain elements within the book – some structure that would shed more light on the book’s strange scenes. Perhaps it is simply a human response to the bizarre to seek a simpler explanation, some means of quieting our confusion.

For example, we might wonder whether there is some deeper structural correspondence between the two parts of the book. The recurrence of scenes and characters in the two parts does not constitute a strict repetition, since the order of presentation differs. Perhaps there is some underlying structure that can be clarified through close examination, and perhaps such a structure (if it exists) could shed more light on Roussel’s motives.

We begin our attempt to uncover such a pattern with a naive mapping between the parts of the book. Briefly, this involves summarizing each distinct passage from both parts of the book and then attempting to map between scene (in part one) and

explanation (in part two). For example, for the scene involving Handel, we draw a line between the tableau vivant in the first part of the book and the explanatory passage in the second half. (We acknowledge that this may not always be a perfect or obvious correspondence and requires a level of flexible judgment; we also must allow for multiple correspondences if it seems warranted. In performing the mapping, I limited the process to a relatively brief consideration rather than ponderous reflection, wanting simply to determine obvious trends.)

The second approach to this mapping involves the same basic procedure, but this time we map from the second part (the explanations) to the first part (the scenes).

A third, more automated mapping technique involves counting the appearances of words that are significant to the story, such as character names or certain objects. Briefly, this includes: creating a list of words in the passage summaries and counting their frequency of appearance; choosing the most significant words among those that appear multiple times; and then drawing a line between first-part and second-part passages where these words appear. Figure 7 shows the result of these three techniques, and Appendix A contains details of the procedures.

What can we derive from this neostructuralist exercise? Unfortunately, the results do not appear to offer overwhelming indication of any clear pattern, though all images do suggest a relationship between the beginning and end of the book. This is emphasized by the diagonals in blue, from upper left to lower right, shown in Figure 8. This pattern may help us account for the extended feeling of strangeness we feel throughout the book; it would suggest that characters and scenes mentioned in the beginning retain a sense of strangeness and uncertainty until the end, where additional resolution is offered.

But perhaps there exists a more important lesson from this exercise, aside from any particular structural pattern we might uncover, and this lesson concerns *the very impulse to perform such an exercise*. In our confrontation with Roussel's absolute

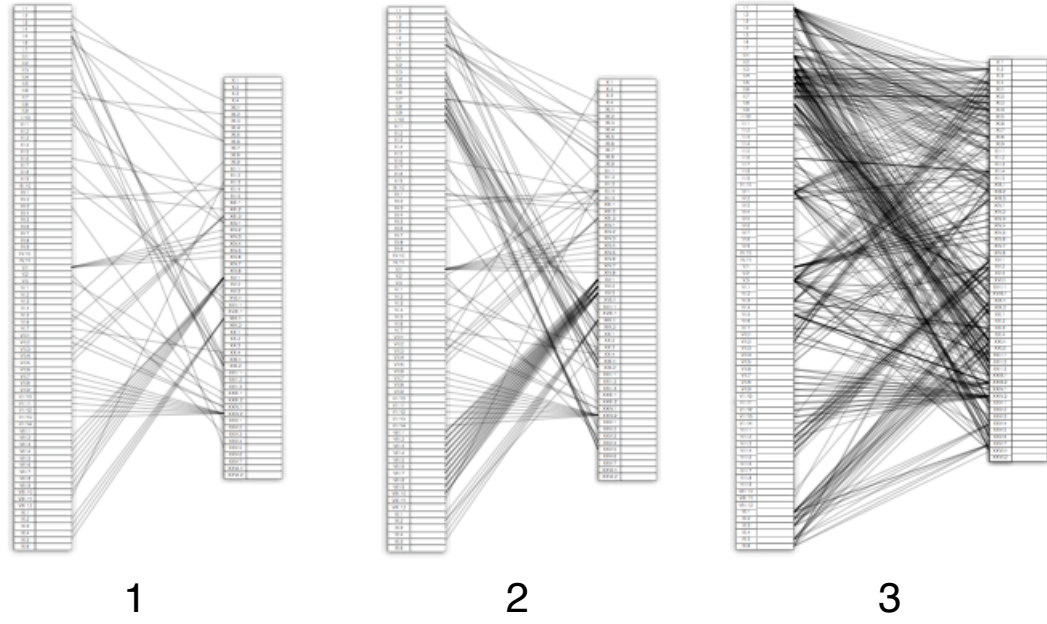


Figure 7: Grasping for Explanation: Mapping Episodes within *Impressions of Africa*

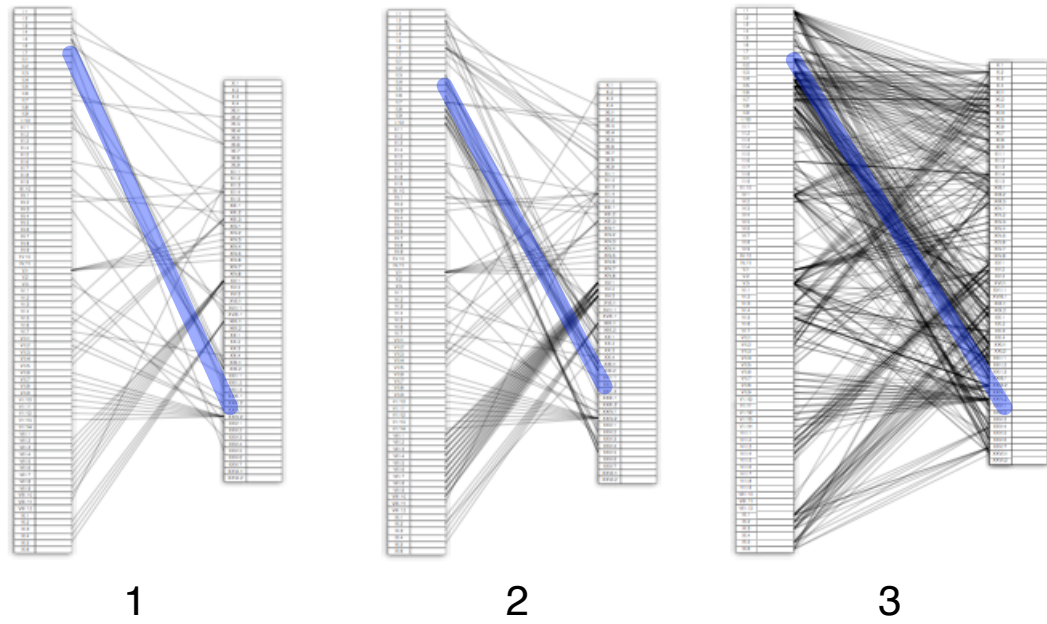


Figure 8: Grasping for Explanation: Mapping Episodes within *Impressions of Africa*: Trends

strangeness of scene, character, and method, one reaction involves an impulse to identify some underlying structure. From a sense of irresolution emerges a searching need for a more unified explanation than we are offered in Roussel's limited explanation. Perhaps it is the seeming arbitrariness of Roussel's images and characters that triggers the impulse to uncover pattern. Or perhaps, as Foucault suggests, Roussel's inevitably inadequate revelation of method activates in us a thirst to spelunk the depths of the work to find deeper and more unified explanations, patterns, and understandings of the work.

From this kind of literary exploration we may gain insight into our encounter with the logical absurd and perhaps too with digital media. But first we shall examine our fourth case study from literature in our development of the logical absurd: Georges Perec's *Life A User's Manual*.

4.3 Historical Connections 2: The Oulipo

Before delving into Perec's work, we consider briefly a group of mathematician authors known as the Oulipo with whom Perec associated; the group's name is a shortened form of *Ouvrier de Litterature Potentielle* (loosely translated as "Workshop of Potential Literature"). The Oulipo formed in the 1960s with French authors and mathematicians who sought to explore the broad relationships between algorithm and literature. Their methods involved not only analysis of established formal literary structures (the lipogram, for example) but also the discovery of new experimental forms. Membership of the Oulipo overlapped somewhat with the College of 'Pataphysics, providing a conceptual lineage between the two groups extending back to Alfred Jarry.

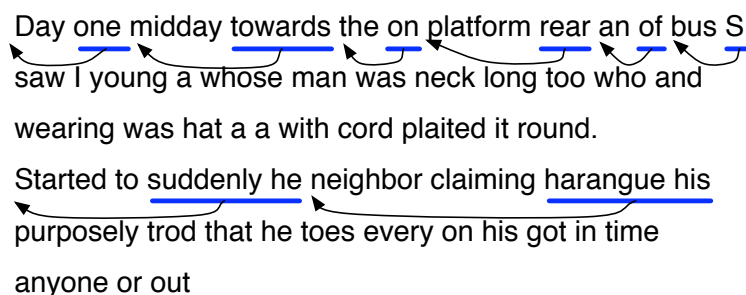
The mathematician and author Raymond Queneau, a founding member of the Oulipo and member of the College of 'Pataphysics, provides an early example of the Oulipo's work. Queneau wrote the quintessentially Oulipian *Exercises in Style*, which

consists of 99 retellings of a simple two-paragraph story involving a bus rider, his hat, and an argument with another passenger. While some retellings involve variations of writing or speech style (the story written as a dream, or with great hesitancy, or told in cockney), many involve formal manipulations of the words themselves; one exercise called “Permutations by groups of 1, 2, 3, and 4 words” reads as shown in Figure 9.

Day one midday towards the on platform rear an of bus S
saw I young a whose man was neck long too who and
wearing was hat a a with cord plaited it round.
Started to suddenly he neighbor claiming harangue his
purposely trod that he toes every on his got in time
anyone or out

Figure 9: An Exercise In Style: Original

The first sentence transposes each word with the next, while the second sentence transposes each pair of words with the next, and so on. To make sense of the permutations, we must recompose as shown in Figure 10.



Day one midday towards the on platform rear an of bus S
saw I young a whose man was neck long too who and
wearing was hat a a with cord plaited it round.
Started to suddenly he neighbor claiming harangue his
purposely trod that he toes every on his got in time
anyone or out

Figure 10: An Exercise In Style: Recomposing

Finally, we reformulate the original sense of the story as shown in Figure 11.

Queneau’s *Exercises* provides one example of the Oulipian fascination with rule and constraint in writing that is so fundamental to Oulipian work; this aspect may also help us distinguish the two varieties of absurd. The Oulipian view of writing contrasts sharply with the romantic notion of inspiration and creativity, in which the

One day towards midday on the rear platform of an S
bus I saw a young man whose neck was too long and
who was wearing a hat with a plaited cord round it.
Suddenly he started to harangue his neighbor
claiming that he purposely trod on his toes every time
anyone got in or out.

Figure 11: An Exercise In Style: Recomposed

notion of constraint is seen as anathema to the free flow of ideas and communion with the depths of emotion and spirituality: constraint as the enemy of liberation. Rejecting the incompatibility of literary creativity with rules, Raymond Queneau wrote that "...inspiration which consists in blind obedience to every impulse is in reality a sort of slavery" (Motte 41).

For Oulipians, it is those who naively subscribe to romantic notions of liberation who are most shackled, for they ignore the omnipresent circumstances of constraint. Instead, Oulipians argue that the constraints of language, both those inherent in the language and arbitrarily selected ones, can be sources of creativity. In his essay "Rule and Constraint," the Oulipian author Marcel Benabou takes this view, noting "even the most rabid critics of formalism are forced to admit that there are formal demands which a work cannot elude" (Motte 41). But it is their reaction to this rather obvious fact that distinguished Oulipians from other literary experimentalists. Instead of viewing constraint as the enemy of creativity, or even as a concession to the necessities of communication, Oulipians embraced linguistic rules and called for the voluntary adoption of additional constraints. Such constraints could both expose the natural rules of language as well as provoke creation of new literary forms. Benabou acknowledges that some authors do not see value in the willing adoption of restrictive techniques, suggesting that "it seems like an unnecessary rule, a superfluous redoubling of the exigencies of technique . . . and is exaggerative and excessive" (Motte

41). But he argues that the boundary between innate rule and arbitrary constraint must be challenged

in the name of a better knowledge of the functional modes of language and writing ... to the extent that constraint goes beyond the rules which seem natural only to those people who have barely questioned language, it forces the system out of its routine functioning, thereby compelling it to reveal its hidden resources (Motte 41).

Oulipian constraint takes a variety of forms. Some are overt and obvious such as Queneau's *Exercises in Style*, which announce the constraint in the title of each exercise. Some are quietly understated such as Perec's *La Disaparition* (translated into English as *A Void*), which avoids using the letter *e* throughout the entire novel. Some are proliferative in nature, such as Queneau's *100,000,000,000,000 Sonnets*, which allows the reader to choose any combination of lines from ten fourteen-line sonnets. Some are more restrictive, such as (Harry) "Mathews' Algorithm", which allows only a small subset of possible combinations of linguistic fragments.

Despite these many forms of Oulipian practice, some conceptual affiliation between such techniques and those of the linguistic absurd is not hard to see: We can imagine Beckett enjoying the above technique for its foregrounding of the problems of language, for its deliberate obfuscation of language that is normally expected to be clear and transparent. But at the same time we can see differences of tone and method in these works. Where Beckett and Pinter's work assumes a darker and more pessimistic outlook, suggesting irresolvable problems of language, Oulipian work seems both more playful and whimsical and more overtly mathematical – and perhaps this mathematical nature imbues it with an air of the optimism of the solvable. The tension between these two outlooks, which share some formal practices, helps us both compare and contrast the two absconds. In this way, the Oulipo helps us complete our conceptual spectrum from the linguistic to the logical absurd.

4.4 Life a User's Manual



Figure 12: Conceptual Map from Linguistic to Logical Absurd: Perec

Even a cursory reading of *Life A User's Manual* suggests that it departs from traditional novelistic conventions in several ways: Leafing through it, we note its nonlinear arrangement, its emphasis on lists of items, and more graphics, diagrams, and signs than a traditional novel. In these respects, the novel could be seen as proto-digital in its nonlinear structure, database-like orientation, and multimedia bent; it is composed not as a traditional linear narrative but rather as a fragmented collection of loosely related material, something like a database of stories and characters. Adding to this relationship between this novel and the digital, I also suggest that it, alongside our other examples, can help us understand the notion of the logical absurd and later the digital absurd, which we will explore further in the next chapter.

Completed in French in 1978 and translated into English by David Bellos in 1987, the novel describes life in a Parisian apartment house at a particular moment, frozen in time, in 1975. As we move in each chapter from room to room of the building, we encounter loosely related stories of the current or former occupants; the novel adopts a striking, painterly tone in its elaborate descriptions of belongings, decor, and occupants of each room.

Compared to Roussel's *Impressions of Africa*, the text seems far less unusual; despite its fragmented and seemingly arbitrary progression, the language appears quite normal compared than the freak-show performances and improbable inventions of the Incomparables. The preposterous, the freakish, and the abject are largely

cleansed from Perec's pages, leaving the best example of the logical absurd we have yet seen, in all its subtlety and complexity.

Of course, we can count on some exceptions to the rule: there are certain facets of the novel that may have greater affinity with the linguistic absurd; they announce themselves with a flourish or make a show of verbal proliferation. Perec's obsession with lists of items, for example, might suggest an affinity with the absurdity of detail of the linguistic absurd, as with Molloy's exhaustive sucking stone passage or Roussel's interminable descriptions of invention. A few examples of Perec's carefully constructed lists include:

- An inventory of 27 items found on the stairs of the apartment building over the years (327)
- A list of more than 100 food provisions in the Altamonts' cellar (153)
- Cinoc's collection of rare words (290)
- A list of items from Madame Moreau's catalog of merchandise for sale (70)

But despite this similarity, the tone of Perec's list-infused work differs significantly from our earlier examples of linguistic profusion: where Pinter and Beckett seemed to impart a sense of desperation and linguistic futility through proliferation, Perec's work contains nothing of that negative valence. Instead we are left with the impression of Perec as one who revels in detail and organization of items in all their complexity. In *Life A User's Manual* we certainly sense the importance of detail, and the work has a distinct feel of the encyclopedic, but at the same time the exhaustive lists do not seem out of place and in fact have much appeal. From these lists we come to understand the importance of *things* in Perec's writing – his detailed lists and descriptions of each room's decor and paintings establish a sense of an eye for the minutiae of one's surroundings. Rather than to demonstrate the exhausted resources of language, Perec's point seems to lie elsewhere.

We can easily posit a biographical connection between *Life A User's Manual*'s obsessive listing and categorization and Perec's work as an archivist for the Neurophysiological Research Laboratory in Paris, where he helped researchers record and catalog their findings. This work required him to develop a highly organized scheme for managing a large amount of information, in a time before easy access to computerized databases. Twenty years after Vannevar Bush's call to mechanize the organization of scientific information, Perec also grappled with the exploding volume of this knowledge; the techniques he developed in the lab, and the mindset of structural underpinnings of massive amounts of textual data, seem to have carried over into his creative work.

4.4.1 Subtle Structures

I believe the most striking characteristic of *Life A User's Manual* is its use of subtle structures and rules: the novel is a quintessential example of the Oulipian interest in creating patterns within literature, but we the reader are largely unaware of this fact (though we may have a sneaking suspicion that something unusual is afoot). The novel's very structure and its references operate on two levels; a surface level provides richly descriptive passages, while a deeper level, not readily observed by the reader, is based on several highly formalized methods that disappear into the text.

One of these methods, described later by Perec and further elaborated through publication of his notes, involves a method known as the "Knight's Tour." Visualizing the apartment house as a 10 by 10 grid, Perec explained,

it would have been tedious to describe the building floor by floor and apartment by apartment; but that was no reason to leave the chapter sequence to chance. So I decided to use a principle derived from an old problem well known to chess enthusiasts as the Knight's tour; it requires moving a knight around the 64 squares of a chess-board without its ever

landing more than once on the same square . . . For the special case of *Life A User's Manual*, a solution for a 10 x 10 chess-board had to be found . . . The division of the book into six parts was derived from the same principle: each time the knight has finished touching all four sides of the square, a new section begins (Mathews, Brotchie, and Queneau 172).

The 10 x 10 grid displayed in Figure 13 shows the Knight's Tour through the apartment building; each square represents a room in the building, and numbers indicate the chapter of the book associated with each room. Arrows indicate progression of chapters. Each of the book's six sections is colored differently to highlight the section breaks.

In this graphic we note the lower left square does not participate in Perec's scheme and that the knight avoids it only by breaking its prescribed rules of motion; while the knight should move in an L-shape (two squares horizontal and one vertical, or two vertical and one horizontal), from chapter 65 to chapter 66 it moves diagonally to the adjacent square. Inclusion of the missing square would be a simple matter, with the movement shown in Figure 14.

In this we see a first example Oulipians' tendency to bend the rules they create with such care. Oulipians traced such deviations to the notion of *clinamen*, the ancient name given to a minimal indeterminacy in the motion of atoms. Epicurus formulated the idea in response to deterministic atomist theory; the *clinamen* designates the smallest possible swerve by which an atom deviates from a straight line. In this idea, ancient philosophers found a basis for the indeterminacy of life and the idea that humans are not automata. Capturing the connection between ancient and Oulipian thinking, Peter Consenstein suggests that

Oulipians hold dear to this notion for the same reason Epicurus did; the essential elements of their constraints must, in order to create a world

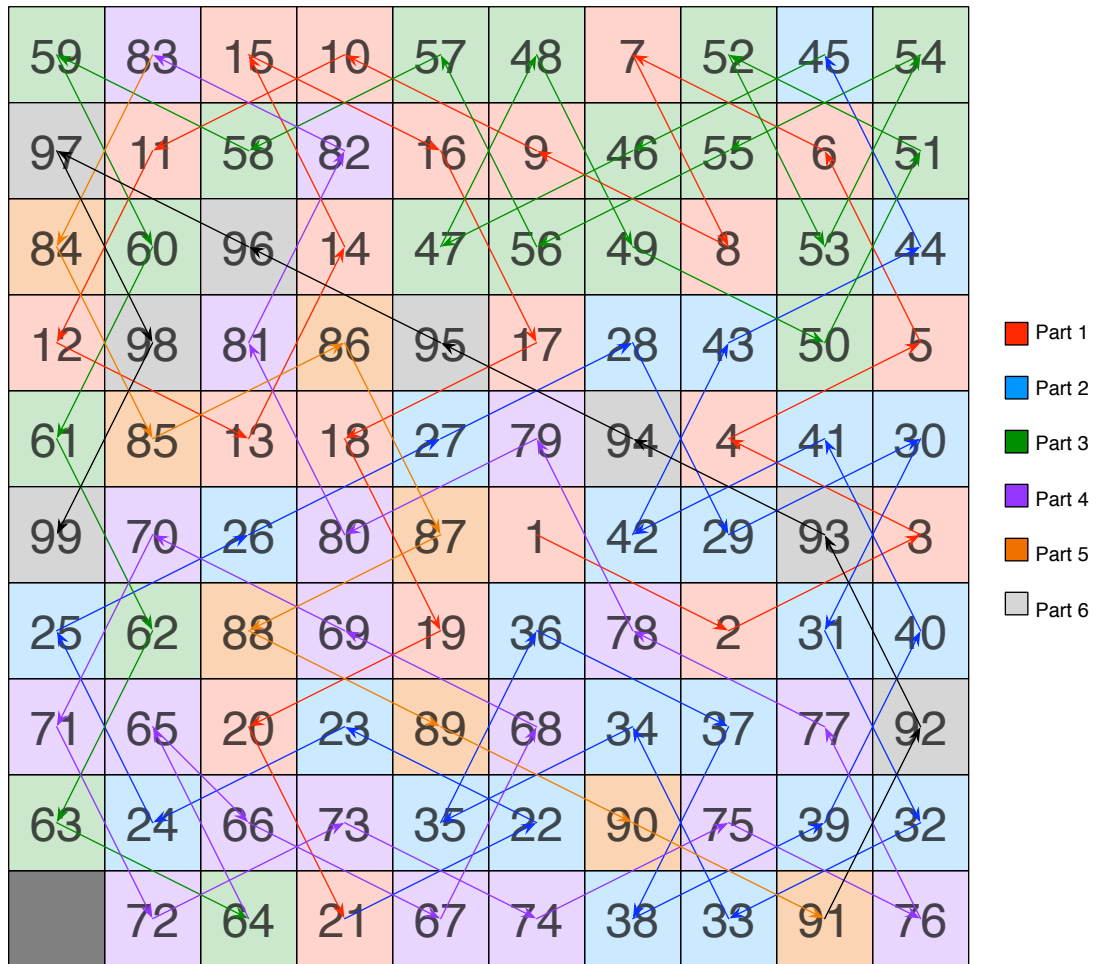


Figure 13: The Knight's Tour in *Life A User's Manual*

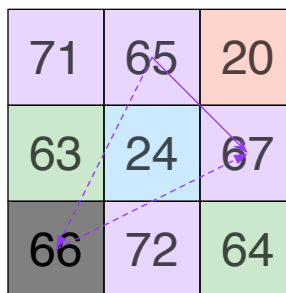


Figure 14: The Knight's Tour in *Life A User's Manual*: An Imperfection

(oeuvre, text) deviate from the norm in an arbitrary fashion so that the constraint is not constrictive, so that the constraint maintains its creative potential (Consenstein 9).

In addition to the Knight’s Tour, Perec used an additional structure, known as the Greco-Latin bi-square, to guide the placement of the novel’s proliferation of things: characters, book references, furniture, paintings, decorations, and other objects within each chapter of the novel. To understand the Greco-Latin bi-square, Perec suggests that we consider a smaller 3 x 3 version of the 10 x 10 version used for the novel:

Imagine a story 3 chapters long involving 3 characters named Jones, Smith, and Wolkowski. Supply the 3 individuals with 2 sets of attributes: first, headgear – a cap (C), a bowler hat (H), and a beret (B); second something handheld – a dog (D), a suitcase (S), and a bouquet of roses (R). Assume the problem to be that of telling a story in which these 6 items will be ascribed to the 3 characters in turn without their ever having the same 2. The following formula:

	Jones	Smith	Wolkowski
chapter 1	CS	BR	HD
chapter 2	BD	HS	CR
chapter 3	HR	CD	BS

- which is nothing more than a very simple 3 x 3 Greco-Latin bi-square – provides the solution. In the first chapter, Jones has a cap and a suitcase, Smith a beret and a bouquet of roses, Wolkowski a bowler hat and a dog ... In *Life A User’s Manual*, instead of 2 series of 3 items, 21 times 2 series of 10 items are permuted in this fashion to determine the material of each chapter ... At the end of these laborious permutations I found myself

with a kind of “schedule of obligations”: for every chapter, it listed 42 themes that must appear in it (Mathews, Brotchie, and Queneau 172).

To explain the Greco-Latin bi-square a bit more, we examine each part of the term: A “Latin square” is a square table of symbols such that each symbol occurs exactly once in each row and exactly once in each column. Figures 15 and 16 show two Latin squares S and T.

1	7	6	5	0	9	8	2	3	4
8	2	1	7	6	0	9	3	4	5
9	8	3	2	1	7	0	4	5	6
0	9	8	4	3	2	1	5	6	7
2	0	9	8	5	4	3	6	7	1
4	3	0	9	8	6	5	7	1	2
6	5	4	0	9	8	7	1	2	3
3	4	5	6	7	1	2	8	0	9
5	6	7	1	2	3	4	0	9	8
7	1	2	3	4	5	6	9	8	0

Figure 15: Latin Square 1

1	8	9	0	2	4	6	3	5	7
7	2	8	9	0	3	5	4	6	1
6	1	3	8	9	0	4	5	7	2
5	7	2	4	8	9	0	6	1	3
0	6	1	3	5	8	9	7	2	4
9	0	7	2	4	6	8	1	3	5
8	9	0	1	3	5	7	2	4	6
2	3	4	5	6	7	1	8	9	0
3	4	5	6	7	1	2	0	8	9
4	5	6	7	1	2	3	9	0	8

Figure 16: Latin Square 2

Two Latin squares are orthogonal to each other if their numbers correspond such

that pairs of numbers (s, t) from each table (S, T) occur only once. Two such orthogonal squares create a Greco-Latin bi-square (called Greco-Latin because symbols are often written in Greek letters for one table and Latin numbers for the other). Figure 17 is a Greco-Latin bi-square formed from the two tables S and T above.

11	78	69	50	02	94	86	23	35	47
87	22	18	79	60	03	95	34	46	51
96	81	33	28	19	70	04	45	57	62
05	97	82	44	38	29	10	56	61	73
20	06	91	83	55	48	39	67	72	14
49	30	07	92	84	66	58	71	13	25
68	59	40	01	93	85	77	12	24	36
32	43	54	65	76	17	21	88	09	90
53	64	75	16	27	31	42	00	98	89
74	15	26	37	41	52	63	99	80	08

Figure 17: Latin Bi-Square

But this basic understanding of the Greco-Latin bi-square still does not capture the complexity involved in Perec’s method of construction. Perec’s primary English translator, David Bellos, has documented most aspects of Perec’s method in his biography of Perec, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words*. Perec maintained 42 lists of items to provide a rich database of content to portion out into the novel’s chapters through the structure of the Greco-Latin bi-square. These 42 lists fell into the categories shown in Figure 18.

Each of the 42 lists was composed of 10 items. Lists 3 and 4, the “Quotations” lists, included authors from whose work Perec would appropriate a quote (though he might not take the quote exactly and might not attribute it to the real author); lists 41 and 42 (shown in Figures 19 and 20) were special “Couples” lists, whose members

1. Position 2. Activity 3. Quotations 1 4. Quotations 2	1	21. Fabrics (substance) 22. Colours 23. Accessories 24. Jewels	6
5. Number 6. Role 7. Third Sector 8. Motive?	2	25. Reading 26. Music 27. Pictures 28. Books	7
9. Walls 10. Floors 11. Period 12. Place	3	29. Drink 30. Food 31. Small furniture 32. Toys	8
13. Style 14. Furniture 15. Length 16. Miscellaneous	4	33. Feelings 34. Paint 35. Surfaces 36. Volumes	9
17. Age/Sex 18. Animals 19. Clothes 20. Fabrics (nature)	5	37. Flowers 38. Trinkets 39. <i>Manque</i> 40. <i>Faux</i>	10
41. Couple 1		42. Couple 2	

Figure 18: Perec's 42 Lists

consisted of well-known pairs.

List 3	List 4
1 Butor	Calvino
2 Flaubert	Mann
3 Sterne	Nabokov
4 Proust	Roubaud
5 Kafka	Mathews
6 Leiris	Rabelais
7 Roussel	Freud
8 Queneau	Stendhal
9 Verne	Joyce
0 Borges	Lowry

Figure 19: Lists 3 and 4: Quotations

List 41	List 42
1 Laurel	Hardy
2 Sickle	Hammer
3 Racine	Shakespeare
4 Philemon	Baucis
5 Crime	Punishment
6 Pride	Prejudice
7 Night	Fog
8 Ashes	Diamonds
9 Arable	Livestock
0 Beauty	Beast

Figure 20: Lists 41 and 42: Couples

For each pair of lists, Perec used a different 10 x 10 bi-square to determine which items would appear in each chapter (and therefore in each room of the apartment

building). For example, if Perec were to apply the bi-square from above to the “Couples” list, this would mean that the first items from each list, “Laurel” and “Hardy”, must be mentioned as a pair when discussing the uppermost left room (because of the number 11 in that place in the grid). The lower right room, which has number 08 in the bi-square, would require the terms “Beauty” and “Diamonds”.

Perec’s method becomes even more abstruse as we discover that lists 39 and 40 (*Faux* and *Manque*, or *Wrong* and *Gap*) were used as negative modifiers to other list items; these lists, which consist only of numbers, refer to groupings of four within the list of lists (see diagram). For example, the appearance of the number 5 in the *Faux* list for a chapter would indicate to Perec that the lists in group 5 (Age/Sex, Animals, Clothes, Fabrics (nature)) would somehow be applied with something wrong in them. Bellos catalogs this and other complications that Perec introduced into this remarkable textual machinery, including: failing to respect all prescriptions in all cases; including objects or events that came to his attention during the writing of each chapter; including allusions to his others works in each chapter; and referring directly to the coordinates from the 10x10 grid within the text of each chapter (Bellos 615). Such examples further demonstrate the importance of clinamen for Perec.

It would be quite difficult to reverse engineer the lists of objects and bi-squares, and with these additional complications such a project seems hopeless. But somehow the knowledge of them provokes an interest in such an endeavor, or at least an awareness of an active level of structure undergirding the work. We recall Foucault’s suggestion that the mere hint of such and underlying structural “key” calls meaning into question.

4.4.2 Disappearance

The disappearance of organizing structure, to the point where it can be sensed only indirectly, is perhaps one of the most significant characteristics of Perec's novel. Without Perec's explicit descriptions of the Knight's Tour and Greco-Latin bi-square, it seems unlikely that we would be aware of these organizing principles. We would be cognizant of the unusual trajectory through the novel, of course, but the structure would be submerged below our conscious awareness. The story of Percival Bartlebooth, perhaps the novels' dominant narrative, plays on a similar idea of disappearance. Bartlebooth, the wealthiest resident of the apartment house, used his considerable resources to carry out a complex, lifelong scheme of creation and destruction, leaving nothing in the end. Bartlebooth's three guiding principles evoke a feeling of utter cancellation:

The first was moral: the plan should not have to do with an exploit or record, it would be neither a peak to scale nor an ocean floor to reach. What Bartlebooth would do would not be heroic, or spectacular; it would be something simple and discreet, difficult of course but not impossibly so, controlled from start to finish and conversely controlling every detail of the life of the man engaged upon it.

The second was logical: all recourse to chance would be ruled out, and the project would make time and space serve as the abstract coordinates plotting the ineluctable recursion of identical events occurring inexorably in their allotted places, on their allocated dates.

The third was aesthetic: the plan would be useless, since gratuitousness was the sole guarantor of its rigour, and would destroy itself as it proceeded; its perfection would be circular: a series of events which when concatenated nullify each other: starting from nothing, passing through

precise operations on finished objects, Bartlebooth would end up with nothing (118).

Observing these principles, Bartlebooth developed a plan of action that is startlingly self-negating:

For ten years, from 1925 to 1935, Bartlebooth would acquire the art of painting watercolours.

For twenty years, from 1935 to 1955, he would travel the world, painting, at a rate of one watercolour each fortnight, five hundred seascapes of identical format (royal, 65cm x 50cm) depicting seaports. When each view was done, he would dispatch it to a specialist craftsman (Gaspard Winckler), who would glue it to a thin wooden backing board and cut it into a jigsaw puzzle of seven hundred and fifty pieces.

For twenty years, from 1955 to 1975, Bartlebooth, on his return to France, would reassemble the jigsaw puzzles in order, at a rate, once again, of one puzzle a fortnight. As each puzzle was finished, the seascape would be “retexturized” so that it could be removed from its backing, returned to the place where it had been painted – twenty years before – and dipped in a detergent solution whence would emerge a clean and unmarked sheet of Whatman paper (118).

This plan seems as notable for its rigid structure as for its ultimate disappearance, leaving not a trace of the arduously created watercolors or puzzles. With minimal effort, we can liken Bartlebooth’s plan to Perec’s novelistic creation itself, in which rigid mathematical structures ultimately disappear into the work, leaving only a hint of the rigorously observed rules of its creation.

The novel portrays Bartlebooth’s bizarre ambition as a reaction to the perplexity of the world, a desire to use artifice and ingenious technique to organize and subdue

it. In Perec's words:

Let us imagine a man whose wealth is equaled only by his indifference to what wealth generally brings, a man of exceptional arrogance who wishes to fix, to describe, and to exhaust not the whole world – merely to state such an ambition is enough to invalidate it – but a constituted fragment of the world: in the face of the inextricable incoherence of things, he will set out to execute a (necessarily limited) programme right the way through, in all its irreducible, intact entirety (117).

It seems entirely possible that this notion also captures something of Perec's own worldview, the archivist's thoroughgoing desire to fix, describe, and organize a fragment of the world and thus subdue its complexity. Do we dare to see in this a distant but kindred spirit of Camus, who wanted desperately to grasp the bewildering world and overcome his own conception of the "incoherence of things"? Where Camus saw the absurd as a constant struggle between the human desire to understand and the world's stubborn refusal to grant this understanding, Bartlebooth's (and Perec's) mission perhaps issues from the same human desire to overcome bewildering complexity and subdue it with absolute simplicity – in Camus' case, the absolute simplicity of metaphysical truth; in Perec's case, the absolute simplicity of a rigorous yet disappearing organizing rule and structure.

Perec biographer Bellos notes that the Bartlebooth story corresponds to one of Perec's earlier literary projects; the novel *Gaspard* was to be a two-part text, where one part "undoes" or deconstructs the other. Perec's later novel *53 Days* also employed this theme (Bellos 195). The notion of doing-then-undoing in an especially elaborate way corresponds not only to Bartlebooth's diegetic activities, but also in some way to Perec's activities as an author, using complicated algorithms and patterns to structure a novel in which these structures ultimately disappear, leaving behind only a hint of their complex workings.

4.4.3 Reemergence

Despite the careful foresight, ingenuity, and technical innovation of Bartlebooth's plan, it ultimately fails as he is unable to reassemble all 500 puzzles before his death; the puzzle-maker Winckler's increasingly devilish puzzles foil the wealthy man's attempts at the ultimate disappearance.

In a similar way, Perec's remarkably subtle work of structural accomplishment succeeds to a remarkable level in submerging its complexity. But though the work reads as remarkably normal, we retain an awareness that there is something unusual about this work: it simply feels different, more structured, more guided by some underlying scheme. We may catch glimpses of underlying structure, and such glimpses seem all the more notable because of the general subtlety with which Perec employs algorithm.

I recall my first experience reading *Life a User's Manual*. Coming across chapter 51, I was somewhat perplexed and allured by an unusual section of numbered phrases, each seeming to allude to a scene or character elsewhere in the novel. The perfect squareness of the fixed-width font indicates that the structure is highly regular, and upon closer inspection I noted that each was composed of exactly 60 characters. Figure 21 shows a portion of this section.

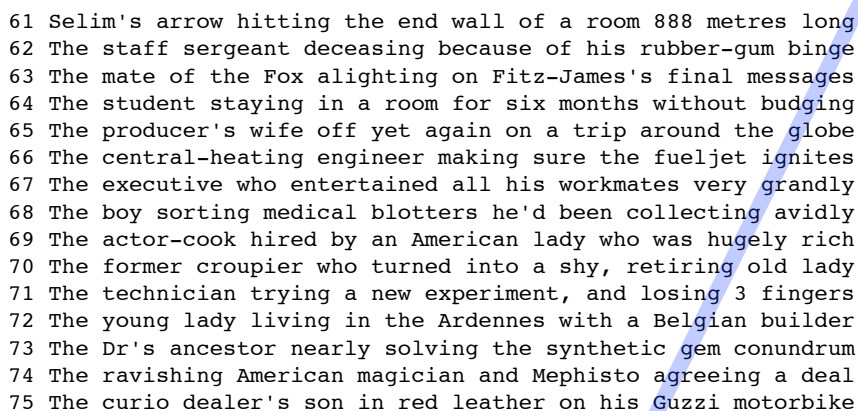
```
61 Selim's arrow hitting the end wall of a room 888 metres long
62 The staff sergeant deceasing because of his rubber-gum binge
63 The mate of the Fox alighting on Fitz-James's final messages
64 The student staying in a room for six months without budging
65 The producer's wife off yet again on a trip around the globe
66 The central-heating engineer making sure the fueljet ignites
67 The executive who entertained all his workmates very grandly
68 The boy sorting medical blotters he'd been collecting avidly
69 The actor-cook hired by an American lady who was hugely rich
70 The former croupier who turned into a shy, retiring old lady
71 The technician trying a new experiment, and losing 3 fingers
72 The young lady living in the Ardennes with a Belgian builder
73 The Dr's ancestor nearly solving the synthetic gem conundrum
74 The ravishing American magician and Mephisto agreeing a deal
75 The curio dealer's son in red leather on his Guzzi motorbike
```

Figure 21: Section from the Compendium

Perec mentioned this section in an interview, acknowledging the structural constraint of character number, but he also hinted at an additional rule without explicitly stating it:

The “Compendium” that constitutes the centre of *Life A User’s Manual* and lists 179 of its characters is a poem subject to two rules, one of which can easily be checked: each line contains sixty typographical signs, with spaces between words counting as signs (Bellos 594).

Bellos notes that Perec never publicly stated the other constraint. In my first reading of the work, I recall my eye moving across the second group of 60 lines, catching a glimpse of an unusual pattern: the letter *g* appears in the 60th space in the first line, the 59th space in the second line, and so on until it appears in the first space in the 60th line. A certain level of excitement and incredulousness followed: Could I be mistaken? Would Perec really have conspired to insert such a difficult-to-achieve pattern into this work? And why? With the constrained letter highlighted we can see the pattern more clearly, as shown in Figure 22.



61 Selim's arrow hitting the end wall of a room 888 metres long
62 The staff sergeant deceasing because of his rubber-gum binge
63 The mate of the Fox alighting on Fitz-James's final messages
64 The student staying in a room for six months without budging
65 The producer's wife off yet again on a trip around the globe
66 The central-heating engineer making sure the fueljet ignites
67 The executive who entertained all his workmates very grandly
68 The boy sorting medical blotters he'd been collecting avidly
69 The actor-cook hired by an American lady who was hugely rich
70 The former croupier who turned into a shy, retiring old lady
71 The technician trying a new experiment, and losing 3 fingers
72 The young lady living in the Ardennes with a Belgian builder
73 The Dr's ancestor nearly solving the synthetic gem conundrum
74 The ravishing American magician and Mephisto agreeing a deal
75 The curio dealer's son in red leather on his Guzzi motorbike

Figure 22: Section from the Compendium: Diagonal *g* Highlighted

Widening the search, I found a larger pattern at work; Figure 23 highlights the diagonals in each section (228-233).

/

Figure 23: Compendium: All Diagonals Highlighted

In other words, the diagonals in the three sections of the Compendium spell the word *ego*. We uncover this fascinating and, on some level, baffling structure at work in Perec's craft. This discovery seems open to several interpretations, each of which may offer some insight into the nature of the logical absurd and the feeling it conjures.

Certainly, an aspect of the puzzle emerges from our experience of discovering the hidden ego and the novel's other hidden structures. These seem to operate as something of an implicit game between author/reader, recast as puzzle-maker/puzzle-solver or (stretching the point a bit) as cryptographer/cryptanalyst. Perec's characterization of Gaspard Winckler, the craftsman who creates beguiling puzzles from Bartlebooth's watercolors, may offer some insight into his view of *Life A User's Manual* itself:

The puzzle maker undertakes to ask himself all the questions the player will have to solve, and, instead of allowing chance to cover his tracks, aims to replace it with cunning, trickery, and subterfuge. The organized, coherent, structured signifying space of the picture is cut up not only into the inert, formless elements containing little information or signifying power, but also into false elements, carrying false information (191).

Another aspect of this ego discovery lies in the pleasure and perhaps even the humor we find in this discovery – not the straightforward humor of a standard joke or the sophomoric humor of a prank, but a deeper, structural sort of humor of the kind Paulos suggested, issuing from an unexpected disparity. Like the humor of the mechanical suggested in *Machine-Age Comedy*, the Compendium on one hand offers a series of evocative, emotional 60-word portraits infused with a sense of melancholy; on the other hand, this is juxtaposed with a rigid constraint very much at odds with the flow of messy emotion. In this disparity we find a sense of play and humor alongside the evocative language.

On another level, the choice of the Freudian word *ego* within the letter structure suggests a thematic connection to deeper psychological ideas. Is the author embedding a hidden reference to his self within the work? Or is he playfully suggesting that such the challenge of creating this arrangement of letters amounts to an exercise of authorial egotism – a proud declaration of skill? Our discovery of this structure leads us to wonder whether the original French can shed light on the meaning. We inspect Perec’s original letter pattern and find in the diagonal the word *âme*, which translates most nearly as “soul” (Perec, *La Vie*, 292-298). Where the translation incorporated a psychological term for the self, the original included a theological one.

[Interestingly, Bellos notes that the selection of the word *ego* was passed through the German translation. Perec explained the acrostic diagonal of the Compendium to his German translator; because there was no three-letter German word for “soul”, Perec gave his approval to replace it with *ich* (“I”) in the German version. The German translator then handed Perec’s explanations on to Bellos (603).]

The word *âme* suggests a different interpretation of Perec’s message: the soul is a religious and transcendent idea; it is not a surface characteristic but rather something deeply rooted that can be accessed, if at all, through patient engagement. Perhaps Perec is including a commentary about the transcendence of pattern within his texts; hidden messages and patterns may be one of the author’s methods of imbuing the work with his very presence.

There is something intriguing and yet alienating about this, as Foucault suggested of Roussel. We are left wondering of the possibility of other messages hidden within the text, and we might even resort to using digital methods to test for such messages. For example, we could iterate through each letter of the alphabet, printing from the Compendium only a single letter at a time. Figure 24 shows the result of this experiment for several letters, and Appendix B gives additional information about the technique used to create the image.

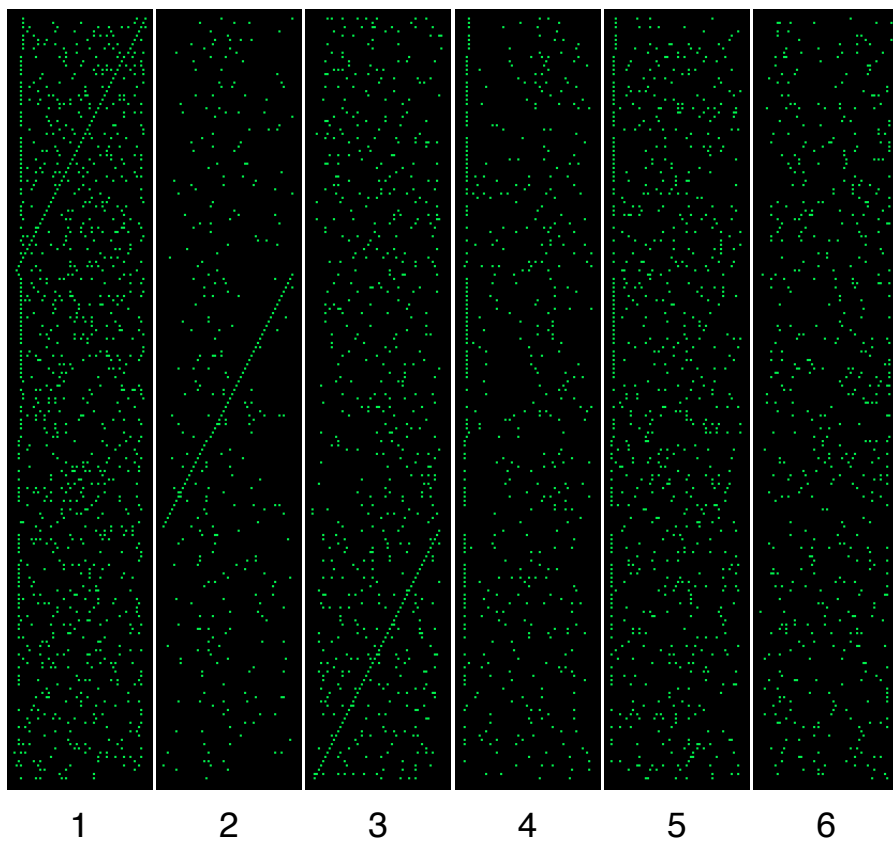


Figure 24: Compendium: Searching for Messages

Images 1, 2, and 3 show the experiment for letters *e*, *g*, and *o* respectively; the diagonals correspond to the word *ego* embedded within the lines, as explained above. The experiment for the letter *h*, shown in image 4, displays an intriguing vertical line on the left side; this may excite our sense of discovery and suggest another embedded structure. But on further inspection, we note that the experiment for letter *t*, shown in image 5, also displays a similar vertical line, and we realize these lines correspond only to the prevalence of the word *the* at the beginning of each phrase. Other experiments, such as the letter *s*, shown in image 6, dash our hopes of finding other patterns – but, consonant with Foucault’s view, our suspicion of other hidden patterns and meanings seems never to disappear once it has been activated. After studying Perec’s constraints, I noticed that my English translation of the book contained exactly 500 pages, the same number of watercolors and puzzles in Bartlebooth’s plan. I wondered if this too conformed to some underlying structure at work. (A more recent edition of the English translation does not have 500 pages, so my suspicions have been quieted – at least in this case.)

The images above bear a certain resemblance to a starry sky, and perhaps in some sense the search for underlying patterns of letter and structure turn us into a kind of astrologer, searching for meaning and pattern among a sea of symbols. We return to Camus, searching for transcendent meaning in a world that stubbornly refuses such attempts. In some way, perhaps Perec taps into this idea, planting a “soul” for us to find buried among the evocative and sometimes baffling complexity of *Life A User’s Manual*.

In different ways, we see a contemporary cultural counterpart to this kind of thinking in works like *Foucault’s Pendulum*, *CSI: Miami*, and *The DaVinci Code*, all of which deal in some way with the notion of a realm of underlying structure, waiting to be discovered, waiting to reveal secrets of profound meaning. In *The DaVinci Code*, Harvard “symbolologist” Robert Langdon encounters layer after layer

of symbols, each of which makes available remarkable resources of knowledge to those who can penetrate it. In contemporary culture, there seems always to be a way to access the knowability of something – it’s simply a matter of stripping away layers, tapping into the underlying substance, and reading the code.

In the next chapter we will seek to connect the notions of linguistic and logical absurd to digital media. I do not suggest that the philosophy or methods of Pinter, Beckett, Roussel, or Perec will have direct application to software. A careful reading of Perec will not inspire professional programmers to develop practical new applications or change their coding practices. But I think the ideas we have seen may help us, perhaps especially those of us who are not professional software programmers, to add another dimension to our thinking about digital media and to understand better the experience of the digital.

CHAPTER V

THE DIGITAL ABSURD

In exploring the absurd, we began by examining the philosophical absurd of Camus, which focused on the gap between man's insistent desire for meaning and the world's stubborn refusal of it. With the linguistic absurd, we continued through the traditional dramatic and literary absurd of Pinter and Beckett, in which concern over meaning manifested itself in the difficulty of linguistic communication and a darkly humorous view of humanity. From there, we extended the concept of the absurd through the notion of the logical absurd, which encompasses the more algorithmic and structural forms represented by Roussel, Perec, and the Oulipo. In a subtler way than the linguistic absurd, works of the logical absurd raise the question of meaning through their use of nonsignifying structures in the construction of the work. We are now prepared to explore these concepts in relation to digital media.

5.1 Contemporary Views of Digital Media

A recent discussion among three prominent digital media researchers provides us with a point of departure for this exploration. In the round-table discussion, entitled "How to Think About Narrative and Interactivity," each scholar presented a substantially different perspective on the long-standing issue of the relationship between games and stories, sometimes described in shorthand as "narratology versus ludology." Amidst the discussion of this main topic, another issue seemed to be present, marked by each participant's choice of language and example works and suggestion of personal feelings and experiences. These differences seemed not only to apply to the relationship between game and story – they seemed to suggest rather different perspectives on digital media in general.

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of a young field such as digital media is its inchoate nature: The field is less settled than others whose topics have endured decades or centuries of honing and crystallizing. The different perspectives offered in the round table discussion are part of this ongoing effort to define the field, but to me they also suggest important relationships between digital media and key terms. In examining each of the three perspectives, we shall identify these prospective terms – terms that will help us to bring digital media into dialogue with the literature, drama, and philosophy of the absurd.

Espen Aarseth began the round table discussion with a call for a more specific typology of interactivity, outlining four types of agency one may experience in digital media: explorative (one moves around, picks up objects, experiments with them); configurative (one may change parameters), social (one may talk with others), and creative (one may change a work for others to see). In his view, these types of interactivity can intersect in different ways with the various elements of games/stories (world, objects, characters, events), and these differing types of intersections provide a framework for studying digital media games/stories. While this summary does no justice to Aarseth’s perspective, I believe it suggests his primary emphasis on *doing* – on how different artifacts enable or preclude various kinds of activity. In other words, Aarseth privileges action – a view that seems consonant with his interest in ergodic texts, which require nontrivial effort for the reader to traverse the text.

With a markedly different emphasis, Fox Harrell presented a conception of game/s-tory focused around the term “narrative phantasms.” This word choice immediately suggests the addition of ethereal and abstract elements to the discourse, as opposed to Aarseth’s emphasis on concrete and observable actions. This phantasmal perspective seems to revel in the boundary between human and machine, language and code – in Harrell’s words, “There is always a mixture between human interpretation of

meaning, and the limited symbolic ways that machines encode meaning. This balance between computationally manipulable structure and ghostly, subjective human meaning is at the heart of the expressive potential of computing” (Harrell, *Phantasmal Media*, 1). This concept suggests a more expansive, more artistic notion of digital media; Harrell’s comparisons between musical and textual or narrative forms suggested many ways in which digital (or proto-digital) texts can create enjoyment not only through narrative and action but also through poetic or aesthetic experience. His discussion of Italo Calvino’s *If On A Winter’s Night A Traveler* suggests a facet of the work hard to account for through a traditional approach – specifically, how Calvino’s lush prose coexisting with the structural rigor underlying the novel creates an unusual and meaningful experience – one that arises in part from the fusion of the disparate realms of human signification and machine encoding.

Finally, Janet Murray presented a view of digital media centered on traditional dramatic elements and the capacity of digital games/stories to heighten or emphasize traditional narrative elements. In her view, successful digital media must create a transparent engagement with these traditional elements, scripting the interactor, setting expectations, creating suspense, and setting clear causal chains. Her example of “About Last Night” emphasized the work’s carefully choreographed points of connection between different iterations of a multisequential work: the reader/user is given clear signposts to locate herself within the multiform story. Murray’s approach privileges understandability, usability, and clarity: these yield satisfaction, meaning, and entertainment under tightly controlled conditions. Murray notes that in digital media, we always run the danger of having computational power outstrip dramatic power, and this creates an ever-present threat to the meaningful structuring and delivery of dramatic elements.

Our aim here is neither to subject these views to exhaustive critique nor to focus narrowly on their differing conceptions of narratology or ludology. Rather, we want

to use these views as evidence of underlying issues that are still very much under consideration in the emerging field of digital media. For me, two such questions that emerge from the round table discussion concern the places of meaning and pleasure in our reception of the digital: Through their choices of words and examples, each participant reveals very different attitudes towards the role of these within digital media. Murray clearly believes deeply in digital media's capacity to produce meaningful experiences through heightening of traditional narrative elements, and for her, pleasure seems dependent on *constraining* computation's vast proliferative power to conform to narrative principles. With a different emphasis, Harrell prizes digital media's ability to create poetic or aesthetic experiences through the phantasmal interplay between machine information and human meaning. For Harrell, digital media's generative, structuring, and interactive capacities appear less as a force to be tightly controlled in the service of a specific kind of meaning and a more open, potential source of beauty and expressivity.

This glimpse into the views of Murray, Harrell, and Arseth suggests that meaning and pleasure play an important if implicit role in current attitudes towards digital media. For me, works of the philosophical, literary, and dramatic absurd raise questions around these same issues. It is through these two concepts that I believe we can build a conceptual bridge between ideas of the absurd and the digital. To begin the bridge-building, we turn first to a scholar whose work considers the place of meaning within both traditional literature and language as well as new media and code.

5.2 Intermediation and Signification in Hayles

Kathryn Hayles' body of work explores key issues of the relationship between code and language; specifically, her work provides us a point of departure to begin thinking about the place of meaning within both of these realms. Specifically, Hayles' development of the concept of intermediation allows us to begin our effort to connect the

ideas of meaning and nonmeaning, pleasure and discomfort, code and language to our emerging ideas of the digital absurd.

Hayles outlines her view of intermediation in two works: *My Mother Was A Computer* and *Electronic Literature*. For Hayles, the starting point is the “indeterminate” relationship between language and code – the fact that each entity imposes a starkly different worldview that cannot be easily reconciled with the other. For Hayles, intermediation “aspires to contribute to our understanding of these complexities by creating a theoretical framework in which language and code... can be systematically thought together” (Hayles, *Mother*, 16) In other words, Hayles hopes to construct a theoretical framework which can begin to reconcile the disparate worldviews of these entities.

Hayles describes the worldview of code under the rubric “Regime of Computation,” exemplified by Stephen Wolfram’s *A New Kind of Science*. This regime conceives of reality by starting with a parsimonious set of elements and a small set of logical operations; “instantiated into some kind of platform, these components can be structured so as to build up increasing levels of complexity, eventually arriving at complexity so deep, multilayered, and extensive as to simulate the most complex phenomena on earth” (Hayles, *Mother*, 18). Conway’s Game of Life provides a simplified example of this view, in which a grid of cells with a simple set of states (alive, dead) follows a very simple set of rules over time (e.g., if a cell has two or more living neighbors, the cell dies) to produce unexpectedly complex structures over time. On a much grander scale, Wolfram’s view of the “computational universe” suggests that a minimal set of primitives and operations can create our reality, the reality of all nature and the universe, over a vast number of computational processes and iterations.

For Hayles, the Regime of Computation interacts with traditional culture in complex ways, each informing the other through feedback loops that may be difficult to trace. But at a broad level, the interaction may be thought of in two ways: one

in which computation is viewed as a literal mechanism underlying our reality, and another in which it is viewed as metaphor for the actual production of reality. For Hayles, either view results in the deep insinuation of code into our reality: “Even if code is not ontological, it becomes so through these recursive feedback loops” (Hayles, *Mother*, 22) Such insinuation may involve the changing of our self perceptions in light of computational principles, as shown by the work of Sherry Turkle, or it may involve the grand restructuring of human organizations, as when the U.S. military’s view of networks and code influences its movement towards “network-centric warfare.”

But perhaps the most penetrating aspect of the implications of code comes in Hayles’ discussion of the computational universe’s relationship to classical metaphysics. The computational universe, with its emphasis on minimal fundamental elements and operations creating vast complexity through staggering iterations of computational processes, has little need for the traditional loci of ontological truth (God, Truth, transcendental signified, etc). In Hayles’ words, “the Regime of Computation provides no foundations for truth and requires none, other than the minimalist ontological assumptions necessary to set the system running” (Hayles, *Mother*, 23) Complexity emerges not from God but from the interaction of layer upon layer of components of a system in ways we are not likely to understand and can only experience by running the system; it is this process that creates the cosmos, life, mind, and the reflexivity of mind-reflecting-on-mind.

This invocation of the transcendental opens an important connection between the aspects of the absurd we explored previously – the philosophical absurd and the linguistic and logical absurd – and the digital absurd. We recall Camus’ concern with the fundamental rift of the human condition, the inability to bridge the gap between the meaningless world and the human desire for meaning; we recall the linguistic absurd’s emphasis on draining meaning from language through various techniques,

thus painting a humorously bleak picture of a humanity bereft of any ultimate meaning; and we recall the rather different feeling of the logical absurd, where submerged nonsignifying structures within linguistic works creates a different sort of awareness of depth which might be mistaken for truth. The discovery of diagonal letters in Perec's *Compendium*, for example, seems at first to offer insight and power over an otherwise somewhat fragmentary verbiage; but the excitement fades as we realize it offers a structural pattern, a creative constraint, a beautiful and marvelous monument to linguistic creation, but little in the way of truth. In the digital realm, when we plumb the depths of code to for an underlying algorithm, for computational pattern, for order among seemingly random bits, perhaps we are searching for a contemporary form of transcendence, or at least a kind of satisfying meaning that lends a feeling of underlying support. We shall return to this complex of feelings as we attempt to elaborate the idea of the digital absurd.

Returning to the concept of intermediation, Hayles makes clear that her primary interest lies not in privileging either the worldview of code or of language, but in studying their interaction as code becomes increasingly prominent in our culture. In her words, "as the worldview of code assumes comparable importance to the worldviews of speech and writing, the problematics of interaction between them grows more complex and entangled. These complex and entangled interactions are what I call 'intermediation'" (Hayles, *Mother*, 31). Though related to Bolter and Grusin's concept of remediation, which accounts for the tendency of new media forms to refashion older media and older media forms to co-opt new media, intermediation focuses less on particular media forms and more on entire systems of representation: language and code. It is this emphasis that makes intermediation particularly valuable to the digital absurd and its explorations of discomfort or pleasure as these entities collide, coexist, or support each other.

When code and language come into contact, we are tempted to attempt some

reconciliation of these disparate entities, to achieve some understanding of their compatibility or disjunction. To understand these, Hayles devotes considerable thought to specific characteristics of each, emphasizing that “although speech and writing issuing from programmed media may still be recognizable as spoken utterances and print documents, they do not emerge unchanged by the encounter with code” (Hayles, *Mother*, 39) In her view, the transfer of writing into a digital format can therefore not be conceived innocently. For Hayles, it is important to take into account both the qualities of language and code: In her words,

I think it is important to undertake a nuanced analysis of where code does and does not fit with traditional terms, especially for this project with its focus on intermediation. The exchanges, conflicts, and cooperations between the embedded assumptions of speech and writing in relation to code would be likely to slip unnoticed through a framework based solely on networked and programmable media... (Hayles, *Mother*, 45).

Hayles thus undertakes a two-way comparison between code and language, first starting with the fundamentals of linguistic theory and attempting to extend these ideas to code, and then performing the comparison in the other direction. To begin the first side of the comparison, she looks at the characteristics theorized by Saussure and later transformed by Derrida, summarized very crudely as follows. In his *Course on General Linguistics*, Saussure departed from the traditional comparative and historical philological study of specific languages and pursued a radical new overarching theory of language in general. Central to his thinking was the theoretical unit of the sign, composed of signifier (graphical or acoustic representation of a word) and signified (the mental concept related to the word), and separate from the actual entity in the material world (the referent).

In the relationship between signifier and signified, Saussure proposed the “arbitrariness of the sign” – the idea that there is no a priori association between a given

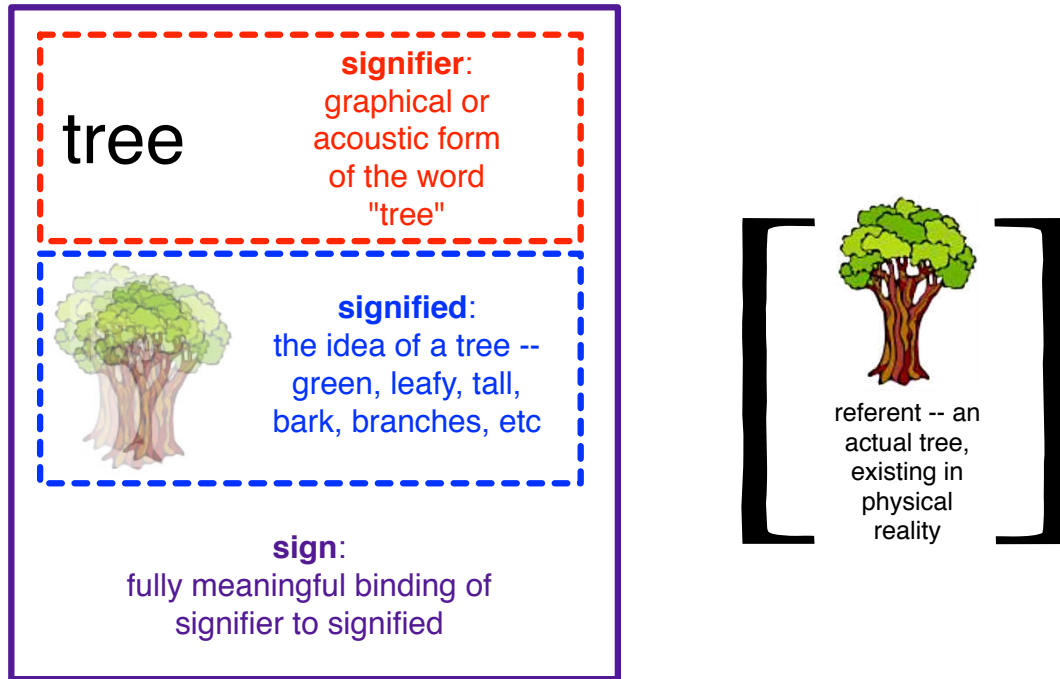


Figure 25: Saussurean Sign, Signifier, Signified, Referent

signifier and the concept it names. For example, the idea or signified of “sister” is not linked by any innate relationship to the acoustic or graphic representation of the word sister. Though connections between signifier and signified are arbitrary, Saussure theorized that stability of these connections accrues through differential relations with other linguistic elements. In this quintessentially structuralist view, signs gain meaning only when viewed as part of the larger linguistic system: The sign sister forms meaning or value only through its relation to other terms, such as mother, father, and brother. Signs themselves have no intrinsic meaning: in Saussure’s words: “In language, there are only differences. . . language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system” (Saussure, *Course*, 118). Though infused with a measure of arbitrariness, relative stability of meaning is achieved through these differential relations.

Hayles follows Saussurean theory into Derridean thought, where the focus shifts

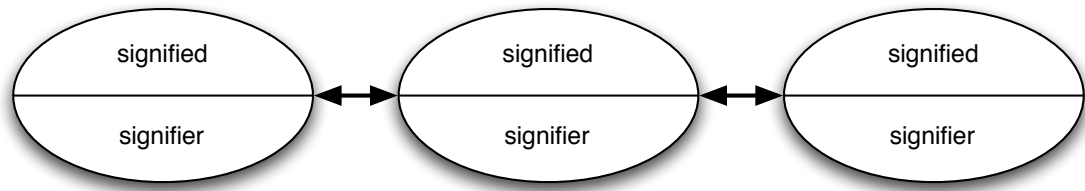


Figure 26: Saussurean Differential Relations

far more to instability and fragmentation. Derrida critiques Saussure's distinction between signifier and signified and questions the very notion of signified, though seemingly without rejecting it entirely. For Derrida, concept of the signified suggests the possibility of a pristine, idealized, stable concept that can be thought independently of language; in other words, the distinction between signifier and signified "leaves open the possibility of thinking a concept signified in and of itself, a concept simply present for thought, independent of a relationship to language, that is of a relationship to a system of signifiers" (Hayles, *Mother*, 47). In Derrida's estimation, this gives unsupportable credence to the notion of a transcendental signified. But he also notes the possibility that any signified can be extracted from one context and placed in another, in which case the signified can become a signifier, thus undermining its transcendence. Because of this ambivalence he finds in the Saussurean signified, Derridean thought de-emphasizes or "marks out" the signified, though it retains a ghostly presence in his theory, as a sort of impossible ideal that we may want to believe in but must continually remind ourselves not to invest with our credence.

In the absence of the signified, Derridean thought focuses on the concept of *différance* to capture a "movement" or force that creates meaning. The term plays on the fact that the French verb *differer* means both "to defer" and "to differ." "De-ferral" is the notion that words and signs can never fully summon forth what they mean and can never transcend the messiness and imprecision of language to access the idealized, transcendent signified of Saussurean theory: The best they can do is to

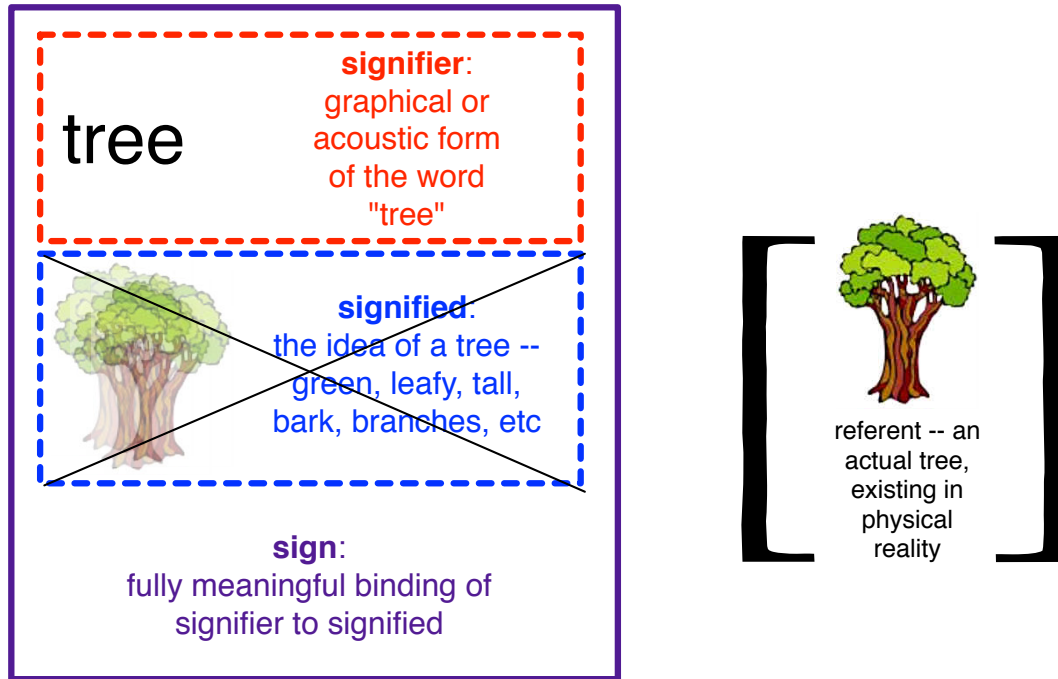


Figure 27: Derridean Sign, Signifier, Signified, Referent

appeal to additional words, additional signifiers, from which they differ. Thus, meaning is forever “deferred” or postponed through an endless chain of signifiers; we think of consulting a dictionary for a word’s definition, where we find only other words; we can search the dictionary indefinitely for point of grounding, a definite point at which we need no longer search, but we will be disappointed. Derridean thought thus comes to seem like an endless “free play” of signifiers in an infinitely deferred search of a signified.

Performing the first side of her comparison, Hayles attempts to fit the concept of code into the theoretical framework of Saussurean and Derridean linguistics. Dealing first with Saussurean terms, Hayles suggests that signifier and signified could conceivably be adapted to the internals of a computer, with signifiers as voltages and signifieds as interpretations of these voltages within other layers of code. Says Hayles,

Programming languages operating at higher levels translate this basic mechanic level of signification into commands that more closely resemble

natural language. . . hence the different levels of code consist of interlocking chains of signifiers and signifieds, with signifiers on one level becoming signifieds on another” (Hayles, *Mother*, 45)

That is, Hayles suggests the following analogies between the realms of code and language:

```
voltages : binary code/machine language
::
binary code/machine language : higher-level languages
::
signifier : signified
```

The direction of signification here goes from the material machine towards higher-level language: That is, the process of signification begins here with the machine, with higher-level entities performing the interpretation necessary to translate signifier into signified. In suggesting this formulation, Hayles underscores that she is simply making an effort to imagine signification entirely from a machinic point of view, prior to human intervention or interpretation. However, it also seems possible to reverse this direction and suggest higher-level language as the signifier of meaning and the process of compiling/interpreting as that which renders a signified. This is perhaps a human- or programmer-centric view, in which signification begins with the instructions given to the machine, perhaps with a `printf(“Hello world”);` command, which is then interpreted into the signified of machine language.

```
voltages : binary code/machine language
::
binary code/machine language : higher-level languages
::
signified : signifier
```

This question of directionality impacts our view of the locus of meaning, in Saussurean terms, or at least of the grounding of meaning. In the first case, where signifier is voltage and signified is the interpretation of these voltages, ultimate meaning seems to be implied as the ultimate performance of code. For example, when a computer operating system loads an application stored as a stream of bits on disk (voltages stored on a medium), the computer interprets these voltage differences as binary machine code, which is eventually executed and results in some phenomenon of output. In the second case, where signifier is code and signified is voltage, ultimate meaning is implied as the final resolution of code into its most fundamental substrate, machine code. These two views – one in which signification begins with the machine, the other in which signification begins with the human – broach the question of the human's place in the signification system of code.

The dual directionality of signification, and the related question of the place of the human, is one of the central struggles of the digital absurd. Hayles affirms this point in recognizing that a signal quality of code is its dual audience of machine and human. In *Writing Space*, Jay Bolter suggests a similar tension between human and machine, language and code in noting that the most unusual feature of electronic writing is that it is

not directly accessible to either the writer or to the reader. The bits of the text are simply not on a human scale. Electronic technology removes or abstracts the writer and reader from the text. If you hold a magnetic tape or optical disk up to the light, you will not see text at all... In the electronic medium several layers of technology must intervene between the writer or reader and the coded text. There are so many levels of deferral that the reader or writer is hard put to identify the text at all: is it on the screen, in the transistor memory, or on the disk? (Bolter 42-43).

We shall keep this idea in mind as we follow Hayles into the territory of Derridean

thought. Hayles notes that the idea of “signification in code” breaks down when viewed through a Derridean lense, suggesting that it makes no sense to speak of the free play of floating signifiers. In code, a signifier must be translatable to some other entity at another level of code. In other words, where Derridean language is theorized as a hazy network of concepts that create endlessly deferred meaning, code must always be unambiguous and finite. Other points of disjunction that emerge in the Derridean stage of the language/code comparison include:

1. Performativity: Language may be performative in certain cases, such as when a dignitary declares “I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth.” But code is performative in its very essence; Hayles cites Galloway’s observation that “code is a language, but a very special kind of language. *Code is the only language that is executable*” (Hayles, *Mother*, 50).
2. Relation to Communities: Code and language share different relations to human communities. Following Saussure, we know that no individual can change the meaning of language; rather, the language community collectively establishes meaning and decides what is a competent utterance. Derrida complicates this relationship by suggesting a fragmentation of the linguistic community, each with its own readings and formulations of meaning. Code, on the other hand, is under the control of a smaller number of experts who in fact can change the function of code (its “meaning”) in a very explicit way; those who develop the Java language standards, for example, can insert new linguistic elements or change the meaning of existing ones. (The fact that these actions may be subject to discussion and approval of an open-source community does not change the fact that deliberations and approval is fundamentally different from natural language evolution within a community.)
3. Difference of Differential Relations: Differential relations operate in different

ways with code and language. Saussure suggests two dimensions of differential relations, the syntagmatic and paradigmatic; the syntagmatic level concerns differences among linguistic terms which are actually chosen, while the paradigmatic level concerns differences among the pool of choices from which each term is chosen.

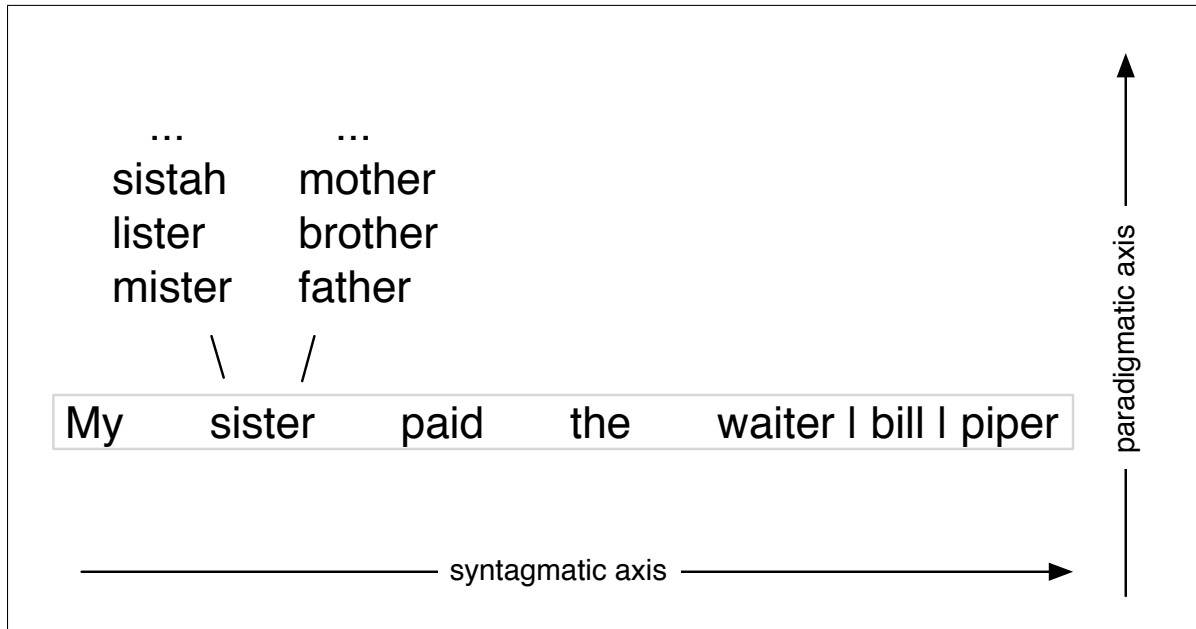


Figure 28: Sausurrean Differential Relations: Paradigmatic and Syntagmatic

Citing Manovich, Hayles suggests that in code these dimensions are reversed: Those terms that appear in reality become virtualized because of their unstable or transitory nature in an interactive environment, since new terms could easily be chosen; and the pool of choices must be stored explicitly (in a database, for example) in order to be offered to the user. In Hayles' words,

when electronic literature offers the user hypertextual choices that lead to multiple narrative pathways, the strategy of evoking virtual possibilities happens not only at the level of the individual word but at the narrative level . . . This richness is possible, of course, only because these possibilities are stored in the computer, available to be

rearranged, interpolated, followed or not. . . Flexibility and the resulting mobilization of narrative ambiguities at a high level depend upon rigidity and precision at a low level (Hayles, *Mother*, 54).

4. Hierarchy: Code involves hierarchical levels that do not correspond to natural language, and this gives rise to a pervasive operation of concealing and revealing. In some cases, revealing underlying code is relatively simple, as when one uses the “reveal source” function to show HTML code underlying a web page. In other cases it may be difficult (though not impossible) to gain insight into the hierarchy of code; I would argue that a significant part of work in a complex IT environment involves knowing which tools provide various views into applications, operating systems, and networks. Hayles suggests that this dynamic of concealing and revealing increasingly influences our way of thinking:

[T]he more the worldview of code is accepted, the more ‘natural’ the layered dynamics of revealing and concealing code seem. Since these dynamics do not exist in anything like the same way with speech and writing, the overall effect – no doubt subtle at first but growing in importance as digital cultures and technologies become increasingly pervasive and indispensable – is to validate code as the lingua franca of nature (Hayles, *Mother*, 55).

In my opinion, the most interesting point of contention begins well before these points, at the Saussurean level of comparison. The notion of interpreting code in Saussurean terms is both fascinating and provocative and leads one to wonder whether the concept of signification can be thought without the messy and ineffable human element. In trying to fit signifier and signified to levels of code, the question of meaning at first seems plausibly resolved, but consideration of some simple examples

leaves one feeling that the comparison may not be quite apt. From algebra, taking the simple equation

$$x + 4 = 5$$

could we say that x *signifies* 1? Or, taking an example from logic, could we say that DeMorgan's Law

$$\sim(a \wedge b) = \sim a \vee \sim b$$

means that the left side of the equation *signifies* the right side? The translations that take place from level to level of code are ultimately based on substitutions and equivalence in a logical or mathematical sense such as these; comparing them to signification seems plausible at some level but cannot seem to account for the hazy uncertainties of human language. Substitution based on strict equality seems incompatible with the imperfect substitutions that make language both troublesome and fascinating; nothing in language is ever truly equal.

But perhaps there is no final answer to this question of whether code can be thought in terms of language and signification, and indeed this irresolution seems important to the concept and feeling of the digital absurd. Where machine and human, code and language form a frontier, this is the natural territory of the digital absurd. Two extremes of thought form the continuum in which we find ourselves. If code cannot be conceived as signifying in any sense, we have an infiltration of a meaningless entity intruding into our symbolic realm. If on the other hand code can be conceived as signifying, we set ourselves a task of deciphering the meaning submerged beneath the surface of media. Neither of these extremes seems satisfying, so we resign ourselves to the complexities of the unresolved middle.

Turning the comparison in the other direction to view language through the world-view of code, Hayles considers the operation of digitization – the representation of

an analog object, image, sound, or document by a discrete set of its points or samples. While digitization is less commonly discussed in the analog world or in terms of language, Hayles argues that the underlying idea of “making discrete” – the act of making something discrete rather than continuous, or digital rather than analog – does have meaning in both contexts of code and language. Beginning with the notion that “the world as we sense it on a human scale is basically analog” (Hayles, *Mother*, 56), Hayles suggests that we impose digitization on the world in many ways, such as producing the discrete phonemes of speech and creating the discrete symbols of writing. But alongside this common quality, Hayles finds several aspects of code that are without comparison in the world of language. The object-oriented programming approach, for example, creates a new way of conceptualizing the world without obvious parallel in language. So, in both directions of the language/code comparison, Hayles finds some areas of similarity but others that cannot easily be reconciled.

5.3 *Distant Reading in Moretti*

Stepping back from these comparisons for a moment, perhaps the overarching issue of this attempt to reconcile the two worldviews is whether and how language and code can both be fit under the general rubric of signification.

In a later work, Hayles contemplates a related topic that informs both the language/code debate and our emerging picture of the digital absurd. From Franco Moretti, Hayles extends the idea of “distant reading,” a practice opposed in some ways to traditional, language-oriented humanities research. In “Conjectures on World Literature,” Moretti started from an unusual motivation: to understand comparative literature in a more comprehensive way than possible with a traditional humanities approach, in which very few texts are read very closely and taken very seriously. Instead, Moretti sought ways to compare literatures without necessarily tackling the insurmountable task of simply “reading more” or “reading more closely.” In outlining

the concept of “distant reading,” Moretti suggested that

what we really need is a little pact with the devil: we know how to read texts, now let’s learn how not to read them. Distant reading ... allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes – or genres and systems (Moretti 57).

In a nutshell, Moretti proposed a shift from traditional linguistic analysis of literature to a data-oriented approach – one which uncovered patterns and movements in the history of the novel that could not easily be identified any other way.

Hayles picks up on this idea within an extensive reflection on the meaning of the Digital Humanities, exploring how digital technologies are changing the way humanities scholars think. For our purposes, an important section of her work treats the practice of reading and its relation to notions of meaning. As digitization makes possible working with text on a scale previously impossible, such scale of searching and analyzing texts suggests new notions of reading. For traditional scholars, “reading is so intimately related to meaning that it connotes much more than parsing words; it implies comprehending a text and very often forming a theory about it as well” (Hayles, *How We Think*, 3). But in distant reading, following Moretti, algorithmic search and analysis may form the bulk of direct contact with texts; “interpretation and theorizing are still part of the picture, but they happen not through a direct encounter with a text but rather as a synthetic activity that takes as its raw material the “readings” of others (Hayles, *How We Think*, 3). (These “others” may be human or nonhuman entities who have collected data or observations about the texts, leading to the idea that machines may be understood to “read”.)

Hayles cites one example of distant reading which resembles in some ways our readings of Perec’s *Life A User’s Manual* and Roussel’s *Impressions of Africa*. Tanya Clement uses code to analyze Gertrude Stein’s notoriously unreadable *The Making*

of *Americans*, which involves complicated patterns of repetition within its 900 pages. In Clement's words, the

complicated patterns of repetition in Gertrude Stein's 900-page novel *The Making of Americans* make it almost impossible to read this modernist tome in a traditional, linear manner as any page (most are startlingly similar) will show. However, by visualizing certain of its patterns – by looking at the text “from a distance” – through textual analytics and visualizations, one can read the novel in ways formerly impossible and re-evaluate whether there is or is not “a there there” (Clement).

For our purposes, the most interesting aspect is the relationship between code and language and the issue of meaning in that confrontation. Clement's work strives to uncover meaning through analysis of a code-like substrate of a printed work. She strives to uncover heretofore hidden patterns underlying this literary work; perhaps this brings to mind our experiences with Beckett's trilogy, in which we catch glimpses of repetition and pattern which we attempt to integrate into our understanding of the novel; perhaps it also brings to mind our experience with *Life A User's Manual*, in which hints of underlying algorithm and combinatoric arrangement color our impression of the novel as we struggle to integrate these into our overall understanding of the puzzle-like novel – or simply enjoy the logical and linguistic play without need for such integration.

Hayles' discussion of code and language and her later work on distant reading centers around the issues of signification and meaning, and one could view her efforts as an attempt to subsume both entities under a Regime of Signification. For Hayles, the worldviews of language and code engage in powerful feedback loops in which each informs the other, and there seems to be an implication that this bidirectional influence builds meaningful experience, at least in part. Of course, Hayles does not

put forward a vision in which code is perfectly meaningful; she points to many ways in which code diverges dramatically from notions of linguistic meaning. But the fundamental term throughout her discussion is *meaning*. In a way, we might see Hayles as a latter-day Camus, engaged in a struggle to find meaning in a code-world where meaning has come under question. Camus saw the world and meaning in terms of an irreparable breach, with humans engaged in a feverish pursuit of meaning but destined for disappointment; taking some liberty to compare Camus to Hayles, perhaps we can substitute ‘language’ for ‘meaning’ and ‘code’ for ‘world’ to carry out the comparison. Hayles seems far less angst-ridden than Camus, in whom we can sense a certain desperation and darkness; existential crisis plays a subdued or sublimated role in Hayles’ thought, but in the struggle to connect code to meaning perhaps we can see a distant relation with Camus.

In a sense, intermediation’s struggle over meaning at the frontier between code and language brings to mind the idea hermeneutics, but one that is updated for the age code and digital media. Following Schleiermacher, the philosopher William Dilthey conceptualized the way in which we come to understand the meaning of a text called the *hermeneutic circle*, described as follows:

In order to understand the determinate meanings of the verbal parts of any linguistic whole, we must approach the parts with a prior sense of the meaning of the whole; yet we can know the meaning of the whole only by knowing the meanings of its constituent parts. This circularity of the interpretive process applies to the interrelations between the single words within any sentence and the sentence as a whole, as well as to the interrelations between all the sentences and the work as a whole. Dilthey maintained that this is not a vicious circle, in that we can achieve a valid interpretation by a mutually qualifying interplay between our evolving sense of the whole and our retrospective understanding of its component

parts (Abrams, *Glossary*, 158).

As we view this hermeneutic process where digital works are concerned, perhaps code presents a new kind of constituent part, though its relationship to meaning remains in question. Hayles' general approach seems to focus on the possibility of recuperating code into the regime of meaning, but she too admits that some aspects simply cannot be reconciled. From this a question emerges: what are we to do with the remainder that cannot be recuperated into the regime of meaning? If the process of intermediation tends to see the regimes of computation and language as somewhat symbiotic, where the two processes often cooperate to produce meaning, perhaps the digital absurd can be seen as the "dark back of intermediation," in which the two processes reject each other, creating a tension between meaning and nonmeaning.

5.4 Case Study: The Dada Engine

The Dada Engine, developed by Andrew C. Bulhak, is a system for generating plausible texts from various grammars (Bulhak, *The Dada Engine Manual*). For example, using the Dada Engine, the Postmodernism Generator creates texts that (at first glance) seem to be meaningful academic discourse on various postmodern topics. A full-text article generated by the Dada Engine appears as follows (Bulhak, *The Dada Engine*):

The Futility of Expression: Capitalist theory in the works
of Spelling

Helmut Dietrich
Department of Politics, University of Illinois

1. Narratives of economy

"Sexual identity is meaningless," says Bataille. In a sense
, the characteristic theme of McElwaine's [1] critique of
dialectic socialism is the meaninglessness of subdialectic
class. Foucault promotes the use of capitalist theory to
attack sexism.

Many narratives concerning not, in fact, discourse, but
neodiscourse exist.

Thus, in Beverly Hills 90210, Spelling denies capitalist theory; in Models, Inc. Spelling affirms subcapitalist posttextual theory. If postcultural desublimation holds, we have to choose between subcapitalist posttextual theory and dialectic socialism.

2. Deconstructivist theory and Sontagist camp

"Society is part of the futility of narrativity," says Sartre; however, according to Dietrich [2], it is not so much society that is part of the futility of narrativity, but rather the absurdity, and some would say the defining characteristic, of society. Baudrillard uses the term 'capitalist theory' to denote the fatal flaw of conceptual sexual identity. The subject is interpolated into a s that includes consciousness as a reality. Sontag promotes the use of capitalist theory to read and modify reality. The primary theme of the works of Stone is the collapse, and eventually the rubicon, of subcapitalist society. However, the main theme of von Junz's [3] analysis of neosemantic narrative is the stasis, and subsequent absurdity, of postdialectic class. But Lacan's essay on Sontagist camp holds that the task of the observer is significant form, given that the premise of subcapitalist posttextual theory is invalid.

A number of discourses concerning not narrative as such, but prenarrative may be revealed. It could be said that Baudrillard uses the term 'capitalist theory' to denote the difference between sexual identity and society.

In Natural Born Killers, Stone examines Derridaist reading; in JFK, however, Stone examines Sontagist camp. Tilton [4] implies that we have to choose between Sontagist camp and subcapitalist posttextual theory.

The subject is contextualised into a S that includes art as a whole.

Therefore, the closing/opening distinction intrinsic to Platoon emerges again in Heaven and Earth. The primary theme of la Tournier's [5] analysis of the textual paradigm of expression is a self-falsifying paradox. Therefore, Lyotard suggests the use of capitalist theory to challenge class divisions. However, any number of dematerialisms concerning material appropriation exist.

3. Joyce and subcapitalist posttextual theory

"Sexuality is intrinsically a legal fiction," says Marx. In a sense, the subject is interpolated into a S that includes truth as a reality. If capitalist theory holds, we have to choose between the patriarchialist paradigm of consensus and subcapitalist posttextual theory.

Therefore, Debord's critique of Sontagist camp implies that discourse is a product of communication, given that consciousness is distinct from sexuality. Bataille uses the term 'cultural feminism' to denote the role of the poet as artist.

Thus, the subject is interpolated into a S that includes narrativity as a totality.

4. Textual postcapitalist theory and dialectic theory

If one examines capitalist theory, one is faced with a choice: either reject dialectic theory or conclude that government is capable of intent. Foucault promotes the use of subcapitalist posttextual theory to challenge outmoded, sexist perceptions of culture. Sargeant [6] states that the works of Joyce are modernistic. But the characteristic theme of the works of Joyce is the failure, and some would say the paradigm, of neotextual class.

It could be said that if capitalist theory holds, we have to choose between deconstructive precultural theory and Sartreist absurdity. A number of constructions concerning the role of the participant as observer exist. In a sense, Sontag uses the term 'dialectic theory' to denote not discourse, but subdiscourse. Capitalist theory suggests that sexual identity has intrinsic meaning.

The subject is contextualised into a c that includes language as a whole. Baudrillard suggests the use of subcapitalist posttextual theory to modify and attack society.

Bataille uses the term 'dialectic theory' to denote the bridge between truth and class. Thus, in Ulysses, Joyce reiterates subcapitalist posttextual theory; in Ulysses, however, Joyce analyses capitalist theory.

1. McElwaine, U. E. (1980) Subcapitalist posttextual theory and capitalist theory. University of California Press
2. Dietrich, J. I. (1982) Precultural Sublimations: Capitalist theory in the works of Stone. Oxford University Press
3. von Junz, V. ed. (1976) Deconstructing Surrealism: Capitalist theory and subcapitalist posttextual theory. Panic Button Books
4. Tilton, T. A. ed. (1981) Capitalist theory and subcapitalist posttextual theory. Loompanics
5. la Tournier, E. O. P. (1975) The Broken Key: Subcapitalist posttextual theory in the works of Joyce. Loompanics
6. Sargeant, H. ed. (1980) Capitalist theory, semiotic deconstructuralism and socialism. O'Reilly & Associates

A casual glance at the text suggests a plausible discussion: Words form grammatical sentences, and the proper names and concepts mentioned do not seem out of place. But on attempting a sustained reading of the text, we gradually realize that the ideas do not connect well; while the form looks plausible, the content lacks sufficient coherence.

Because source code and grammar definition files for the Dada Engine are available, we can seek deeper understanding of how the program combines certain elements to achieve a patina of meaning. To isolate a small section for examination, we focus on the generator's formula for generating postmodern quotes (e.g., "Sexual identity is meaningless," says Bataille; "Society is part of the futility of narrativity," says Sartre). Within the grammar definition we see several interrelated rules for creating such quotes, as shown in Figure 29 (Bulhak, *The Dada Engine*).

The top-level rule called "pseudo-quote" consists of a call to a subordinate rule called "big-thing", which consists either of literal strings ("society", "class", etc) or a call to a further subordinate rule ("big-abst-thing"), followed by the literal string "is", followed by a call to another subordinate rule called "state-of-being". Following this chain of combination and substitution, we can graph all possible results of the pseudo-quote rule, as shown in Figure 30.

In this graph we get a sense of the vast generativity of a relatively set of simple rules, which can generate more than 10,000 reasonably plausible sentences. A sampling of these includes:

```
art is used in the service of archaic, colonialist
    perceptions of society
art is used in the service of archaic, colonialist
    perceptions of class
art is used in the service of archaic, colonialist
    perceptions of culture
art is used in the service of archaic, colonialist
    perceptions of language
art is used in the service of archaic, colonialist
    perceptions of art
```

```

pseudo-quote: big-thing " is " state-of-being ;

big-thing: "society" | "class" | big-abst-thing | "sexual
identity" ;

big-abst-thing: "culture" | "language" | "art" | "reality"
| "truth" | "sexuality" | "narrativity" | "consciousness" ;

state-of-being: state-of-being-2 | abst-adverb " " state-of-
being-2 | "part of the " something-of-2 " of " big-abst-
thing ;

state-of-being-2: "impossible" | "meaningless" | "
unattainable" | "elitist" | "responsible for " bogeyman | "
used in the service of " bogeyman | "a legal fiction" | "
dead" ;

abst-adverb: "fundamentally" | "intrinsically" ;

something-of-2: "failure" | "futility" | "collapse" | "
fatal flaw" | "rubicon" | "stasis" | "meaninglessness" | "
absurdity" | "paradigm" | "genre" | "defining
characteristic" | "dialectic" | "economy" ;

bogeyman: "capitalism" | "hierarchy" | "the status quo" | "
class divisions" | "sexism" | neg-adj " perceptions of "
big-thing ;

neg-adj: neg-adj1 | neg-adj2 | neg-adj1 ", " neg-adj2 ;

neg-adj1: "outdated" | "outmoded" | "archaic" ;

neg-adj2: "sexist" | "colonialist" | "elitist" ;

```

Figure 29: The Postmodernism Generator’s “Pseudo-Quote”: Rule Expression

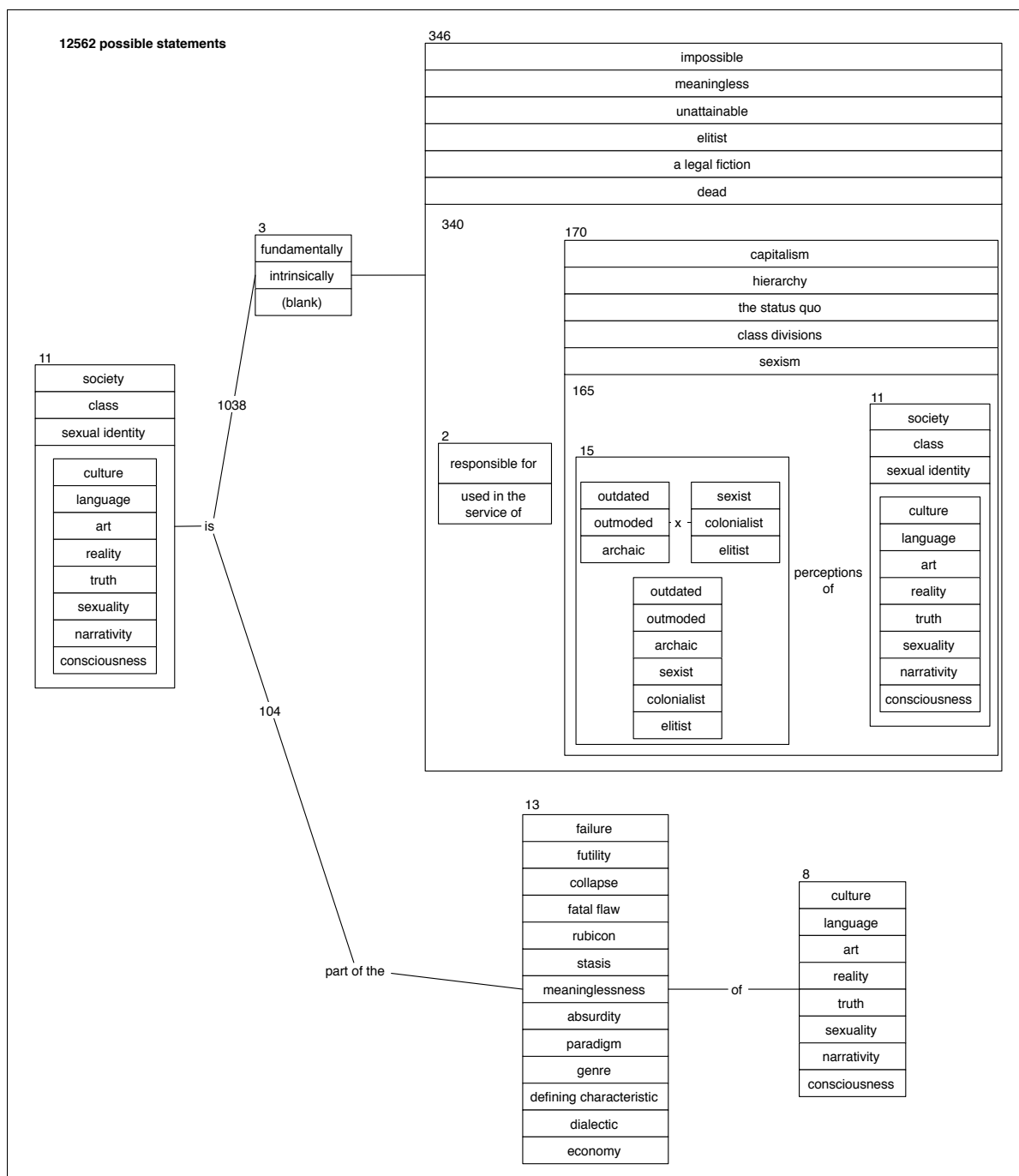


Figure 30: The Postmodernism Generator’s “Pseudo-Quote”: 12562 Possibilities

art is used in the service of archaic, colonialist
perceptions of reality
art is used in the service of archaic, colonialist
perceptions of truth
art is used in the service of archaic, colonialist
perceptions of sexuality
art is used in the service of archaic, colonialist
perceptions of narrativity
art is used in the service of archaic, colonialist
perceptions of consciousness
art is used in the service of archaic, colonialist
perceptions of sexual identity
art is used in the service of outdated, elitist perceptions
of society
art is used in the service of outdated, elitist perceptions
of class
art is used in the service of outdated, elitist perceptions
of culture
art is used in the service of outdated, elitist perceptions
of language
art is used in the service of outdated, elitist perceptions
of art
art is used in the service of outdated, elitist perceptions
of reality
art is used in the service of outdated, elitist perceptions
of truth
art is used in the service of outdated, elitist perceptions
of sexuality
art is used in the service of outdated, elitist perceptions
of narrativity
art is used in the service of outdated, elitist perceptions
of consciousness
art is used in the service of outdated, elitist perceptions
of sexual identity
art is used in the service of outmoded, elitist perceptions
of society
art is used in the service of outmoded, elitist perceptions
of class
art is used in the service of outmoded, elitist perceptions
of culture
art is used in the service of outmoded, elitist perceptions
of language
art is used in the service of outmoded, elitist perceptions
of art
art is used in the service of outmoded, elitist perceptions
of reality
art is used in the service of outmoded, elitist perceptions
of truth
art is used in the service of outmoded, elitist perceptions
of sexuality

art is used in the service of outmoded, elitist perceptions
 of narrativity
 art is used in the service of outmoded, elitist perceptions
 of consciousness
 art is used in the service of outmoded, elitist perceptions
 of sexual identity
 art is used in the service of archaic, elitist perceptions
 of society
 art is used in the service of archaic, elitist perceptions
 of class
 art is used in the service of archaic, elitist perceptions
 of culture
 art is used in the service of archaic, elitist perceptions
 of language
 art is used in the service of archaic, elitist perceptions
 of art
 art is used in the service of archaic, elitist perceptions
 of reality
 art is used in the service of archaic, elitist perceptions
 of truth
 art is used in the service of archaic, elitist perceptions
 of sexuality
 art is used in the service of archaic, elitist perceptions
 of narrativity
 art is used in the service of archaic, elitist perceptions
 of consciousness
 art is used in the service of archaic, elitist perceptions
 of sexual identity
 art is a legal fiction
 art is dead
 art is fundamentally impossible
 art is fundamentally meaningless
 art is fundamentally unattainable
 art is fundamentally elitist
 art is fundamentally responsible for capitalism
 art is fundamentally responsible for hierarchy
 art is fundamentally responsible for the status quo
 art is fundamentally responsible for class divisions
 art is fundamentally responsible for sexism
 art is fundamentally responsible for outdated perceptions
 of society
 art is fundamentally responsible for outdated perceptions
 of class
 art is fundamentally responsible for outdated perceptions
 of culture
 art is fundamentally responsible for outdated perceptions
 of language
 art is fundamentally responsible for outdated perceptions
 of art
 art is fundamentally responsible for outdated perceptions
 of reality


```
art is fundamentally responsible for outdated perceptions
  of truth
art is fundamentally responsible for outdated perceptions
  of sexuality
art is fundamentally responsible for outdated perceptions
  of narrativity
art is fundamentally responsible for outdated perceptions
  of consciousness
```

Perhaps such output gives us a glimpse into the generative power which Murray believes must be tightly controlled in order to preserve narrative meaning. But there is also a certain beauty and fascination in such proliferative power and in the movement of regularity and difference in each line, and the issue of meaning seems quite unrelated to our fascination: The effect is more like a combination of word and art underwritten by an unseen yet perceivable algorithm. To see the regularity more clearly, we code each word as a colored cell and examine the output, as shown in Figure 31.

Such a visualization is admittedly very general, since it captures the movement not just of our postmodern quote generator but of any algorithmic combinatoric activity. But it does perhaps capture a different view of the experience of such generativity and the satisfaction of a regular movement through a vast series of combinations, not the satisfaction of traditional signification but rather a different sort of pleasure, tinged with a certain humor.

With these alternative views into the Postmodernism Generator – the output of a single invocation of the program, the script code, the graphed possibilities of a single sentence, and a section of the thousands of actual sentences that could be produced – we can see some of the aspects of Hayles' concept of intermediation, the intermingling of code and language. Perhaps we can gain a sense of the experience of intermediation as we step through these various representations of the work.

Our first exposure to the Postmodernism Generator reveals an ostensibly sensible discussion of postmodern topics: Grammatically correct sentences, proper names and concepts that properly reflect the topic, and the expected form for an academic paper

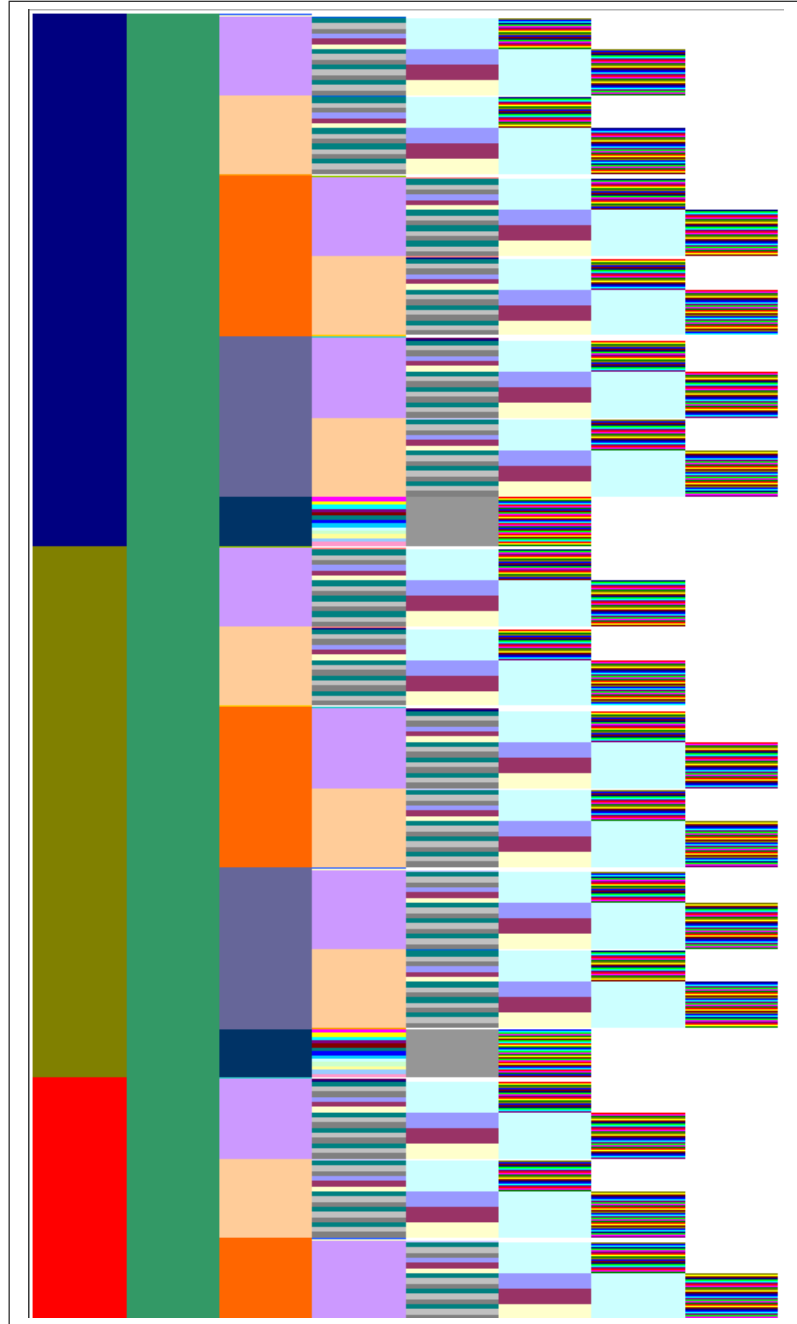


Figure 31: Pseudo-Quote Possibilities: An Abstract View

in the humanities (title, sections, citations, etc). The importance of jargon and other specialized language is perhaps one aspect that allows the Postmodern Generator to succeed in creating ostensible meaning; a less specialized type of discourse might not lend itself as readily to the automated generation of apparently meaningful language. In this sense, one sense of code (the linguistic) opens itself to favorable interaction with another sense of code (the computational).

As we begin to inspect the text further, reading for a sense of comprehensive meaning, a creeping awareness of nonsense dawns on us: Sentences do not seem to fit together coherently, references do not seem entirely plausible, and the text begins to see altogether too stereotypical of postmodern discourse. We begin to see a rupture between code and language.

Dissatisfied with our initial reading, we run the program again to create another text, hoping the next will produce a more satisfying result. We may run the program again and again, producing uncountably many other possibilities which give no more satisfaction, though on occasion we may find glimmers of interest within the synthetically assembled text. Perhaps at this stage we find a tension between the general awareness of an endless proliferation of texts and the hope of finding an especially satisfying result through another iteration. We may at this stage recall the notion of the linguistic absurd, in which meaning seems to be drained away by the proliferation of language.

But as we tire of these iterations, perhaps we are struck by the urge to know the text in a different dimension, to get at the heart of its productive capability and its potential to produce meaning (or not). We consult the raw script code, where we find perhaps the most direct evidence of the intermingling of language and code. When we first discover this code it may seem like we have stumbled upon a kind of foundation of meaning, the critical point from which signification emits. Yet the more we explore the code the less conclusive it seems, as we begin to want to reconstruct meaningful

wholes from this assemblage of parts and rules for their logical combination.

To come to grips with the combinatorial possibilities and the logic of linguistic assembly, we limit our exploration to a single sentence, the “postmodern pseudo-quote”, and create a graph of the structure. Through this graph we hope to come to terms with the vast number of sentences that can be created from a small number of rules and to understand the relationship between the code and its linguistic output.

But amidst this analytic activity we are inevitably tempted back into a synthetic mode: we want to see a more concrete representation of complete linguistic statements, so we endeavor to collect a vast number of iterations and examine the output. Creating such a profusion of statements creates a different experience than simply examining rules or graphs; part of the interest may involve a simultaneous bewilderment at the overwhelming scale of possibility and textual output, while another part may involve a graphical pleasure as we inspect patterns of verbal alternation. Perhaps in this sense we see some of the same interest in verbal systems, patterns, and difference that motivated Saussure.

Overall, our experience with the Postmodern Generator demonstrates a dynamic at work in Hayles’ concept of intermediation: the fluctuating understanding of meaning as we oscillate between the realms of code and language. At different points in these explorations we may find a kind of discomfort with linguistic proliferation, feeling meaning drained away with each iteration that spews forth; the satisfaction of “getting to the bottom of things” as we delve into the layers of code; the realization that, even though we have discovered something fundamental in the realm of code, its fragments and logic cannot put to rest to the question of linguistic meaning; and the temptation to re-engage in the task of linguistic creation while accepting (and perhaps reveling in) the prospect of verbal proliferation. In a sense, we come full circle without revealing final answers, which are anyway impossible in the realm of language, but perhaps understanding a bit more about the interactions of code and

language.

5.5 Case Study: Nick Montfort's Minimal Poetry Generators

Nick Montfort, who has long been interested in digital writing, has developed a series of Perl programs that exploit the tension between meaning and nonmeaning, code and language; in this series we can locate several aspects of the digital absurd.

The four programs, known as the ppg256 series, are Perl scripts of precisely 256 characters. In Montfort's words, the programs "run in a standard Perl interpreter, using no external data sources, online or local, making use of no special libraries and invoking no other programs. These tiny programs are investigations into language, poetics, and computation" (Montfort, *ppg256 Series*, 1). This kind of exploration into constraint, algorithm, and language resonates strongly with Oulipian work such as *Life A User's Manual*.

Montfort emphasizes the importance of viewing these generators not as typical literary creations, examined from the surface alone. He also encourages us to explore the raw code, and this approach brings code into parity with language as a site of exploration, enjoyment, and potential meaning. Yet, even more than most code, the constraint of minimality forces even those familiar with Perl to work to understand the mechanism. Because line breaks add needlessly to the character count (in Perl), Montfort avoided them in constructing the command; therefore the command line appears quite compact, even baffling, as shown in Figure 32.

```
perl -le 'sub p{(unpack"(A3)*",pop)[rand 18]}sub w{p("apebotboyelfgodmannunorcgunhateel"x2)}sub n{p("theone"x8)._.p("bigdimdunfathiplitredwanwax")._.w.w."\n"){print"\n".n.and\n".n.p("cutgothitjammetputransettop"x2)._.p("herhiminit offon outup us "x2);sleep 4;redo}'
```

Figure 32: Monfort's ppg256-3, without spaces

Adding the usual sorts of white space, the code appears somewhat more legible, as

shown in Figure 33.

```
sub p {
    (unpack "(A3)*", pop)[rand 18]
}

sub w {
    p("apebotboyelfgodmannunorcgunhateel"x2)
}

sub n {
    p("theone"x8)._.p("bigdimdunfathiplitredwanwax")._.
    w.w."\n"
}

{
    print "\n".n."and\n".n.p("cutgothitjammetputransettop"x2)._.
    p("herhimin it offon outup us "x2);
    sleep 4;
    redo
}
```

Figure 33: Monfort's ppg256-3, spaces added

But even in this form, the code isn't necessarily clear, even for one fluent in Perl; one must be able to follow Perl's pop, rand, and unpack functions and its 'x' operator across two subroutines and imagine the output. From the raw code, it is not easy to imagine what sort of signification, if any, the output might generate.

The running program generates an endless stream of four-line stanzas, where the combination of syllables creates more or less meaningful scenarios, depending partially on the choice and arrangement of syllables and our own mental associations. Figure 34 shows example output (Montfort, *ppg256 Series*).

The large combination potential of the raw ingredients imparts a feeling of vastness and emptiness. When we focus our thoughts on the vast potential rather than the individual example, meaning seems impossible, drained away, somehow lost among the enormous space of verbal combinations. By my calculation, there are

```
3 * 10 * 11 * 11 *
1 *
3 * 10 * 11 * 11 *
```

```
__hatape
and
the__elfape
met_her

__apeboy
and
one_wan_elfgod
set_him

one_red_godelf
and
_big_apegun
jam_in

the__orcman
and
the__gunnun
set_us

the__nunman
and
one_fat_hatgod
cut_him

one__elfboy
and
the_hip_botboy
got_up
```

Figure 34: Monfort's ppg256-3, output

possible stanzas, or 1,067,328,900. (These are not all equally weighted, though, because the operation of the ‘x’ function along with the ‘p’ subroutine creates unequal likelihood that various syllables will be chosen.) Such vastness brings to mind Baudrillard’s suggestion that the regime of information tends to drain meaning as it promotes proliferation.

Yet we are surprised when meaning emerges in the individual example. The penultimate stanza in the examples above (`the_nunman / and / one_fat_hatgod /cut_him`) seems to evoke a quirky idea: a male nun and a hatted and corpulent divinity, partnered in violent crime. The last example (`one_elfboy / and / the_hip_botboy /got_up`) suggests a vaguely homosexual liaison between a young elf and an automaton. Admittedly, this interpretation may be as much a result of my own preoccupations as of Montfort’s references to sexuality in his discussion of the project – but reflecting on the provenance of such interpretations is perhaps part of the pleasure of such a work, which perhaps like a verbal Rorschach test evokes telling signs from individual acts of interpretation.

For me, a valence of humor also pervades this work, as with the other absurdist works we have seen. In one aspect, the continual creation of borderline gibberish recalls some scenes of Pinter and Beckett, in which a proliferation of language seems to drain away significance; this can create a sense both of amusing and depressing nonsense. Humor here may also be a product of the two levels of language and code cooperating (or not cooperating) to catalyze or dissolve meaning. A certain component of the humor may issue from mechanical creation sitting alongside the human creation of meaning: We recall the idea of humor as “the mechanical encrusted on the living.”

The minimal and open-source nature of the code allows us to explore directly the mechanism underlying the expressed language; because of this the project does not

produce the same sense of uncertainty we might feel with Roussel or other Oulipian works – the sense of an underlying mechanism at work, unseen, unknown, and possibly unknowable to us. As we explore the code and become familiar with its mechanism, we may find a pleasure of discovery of pattern and function: Only after deconstructing the code and exploring it thoroughly was I able to grasp the code holistically and appreciate the cleverness of certain elegant compact notations (e.g., techniques for having certain things happen with increasing probability and for weighting certain possibilities more than others). The moment of uncertainty followed by the resolution of clarity seems to bring a measure of play and enjoyment to exploring this code. But even a thorough understanding of the code – viewing the complete set of word fragments, how they are combined, how they are weighted differently, and so forth – only partially explains the emergent experience of the running program, much as a full understanding of the mechanism of protein synthesis may not explain the experience of life. This not so much a discovery as a reminder: The underlying code cannot fully explain the generation of meaning, though it may serve as a source of a certain kind of enlightenment, pleasure, or satisfaction.

5.6 Case Study: Works of Kenneth Goldsmith

In several works, Kenneth Goldsmith has depicted torrents of language: *Day* consists of a day's *New York Times* retyped from first to last page; *The Weather* consists of a year's worth of weather reports; and *Soliloquy* records a week's worth of every utterance of his spoken language. Those unacquainted with such works may find the notion puzzling, and to be sure they are unusual. Yet these works are also oddly enjoyable in ways that are somewhat similar to the enjoyment we saw in examples of the linguistic and logical absurd. Perhaps the reasons for this enjoyment may help us gain insight into such works and into the digital absurd.

Goldsmith's work displays a clear tendency towards the linguistic absurd, offering

outpourings of language that may leave one feeling exhausted, linguistic meaning lost amidst the flood of verbiage. The very idea of recording every scrap of conversation, in all of its inanity and mundaneness recalls Pinter’s brilliant capturing of the absurdity of everyday dialogue.

And yet amidst this blizzard of text, meaning survives in an oddly distorted form. Part of the pleasure of reading *Day* is perhaps the dynamic of confusion and resolution one gets from flipping through its pages: certain sections identify themselves easily, such as stock tables, weather reports, movie listings, and classifieds. Other fragments are less identifiable, particularly when Goldsmith’s writing process mixes incompatible snippets together in haphazard fashion, as shown in Figure 35 (Goldsmith, *Day*, 15).

```
As firefighters continued to spray arcs of water on the
smoldering
Continued on Page B7
gorewillsayanything.com
THE WHITE HOUSE
PAID FOR BY THE REPUBLICAN NATIONAL COMMITTEE
The ad combines television images of Mr. Gore with scornful
dialogue and a not yet operational web address.
BEWARE! IF YOU LIKE STORIES WITH HAPPY endings, avoid
reading Lemony Snicket’s A Series of Unfortunate Events,
now unfortunately NYT bestseller! www.lemonysnicket.com --
ADVT.
```

Figure 35: Goldsmith’s *Day*, snippet

These chance associations seem to allow a free association of firefighters and smoldering ruins, political attack and posturing (White House, RNC, Gorewillsayanything), and (via the mention of Lemony Snicket), the “unfortunate” politicization of 9/11. As much as anything, such a train of thought reflects the human desire to create meaning at the site of its obliteration, and perhaps this is one of the most alluring aspects of Goldsmith’s work.

Goldsmith’s online version of *Soliloquy* brings to his work an aspect that includes aspects of the logical absurd alongside the linguistic. The transcript of his spoken words over the course of a week displays initially as a white screen; hovering over

phrases causes them to appear, only to disappear again when the mouse moves away. (See Figure 36.)



Figure 36: Goldsmith’s *Soliloquy*: Display

This creates a feeling something like the game Concentration, as we try to remember surrounding phrases we have seen in an attempt to piece together the stream of conversation. In this way we are, in a sense, seeking an elusive, hidden structure for the work. Soon we may tire of this game and seek a more foundational view, invoking the “view source” command of the browser, as shown in Figure 37; this gives us a more complete view of the code and may help us complete the conversation, though because Goldsmith recorded only his words, our understanding of the situation remains incomplete and one-sided.

5.7 *Barthes, and the Other Side of Intermediation*

Our developing concept of the absurd allows us to understand several aspects of these explorations. Camus’ philosophy of the absurd gave us the concept of an irreparable breach between the relentlessly meaningless world and the insistently human hunger for meaning, and it also suggested a joyously frenzied creative exploration in the face of this dilemma. Paulos helped us understand the humorous aspect of such



Figure 37: Goldsmith's *Soliloquy*: Code

otherwise-distressing rifts, based on the imperfect compatibility between the world and human. Our examination of the linguistic absurd loosely extends this philosophical concept into the realm of literature and drama, giving us a language to understand the fracturing of language, the draining away of meaning through repetition and emphasis on the ordinariness of communication, painting a darkly humorous portrait of the human encounter with language. The logical absurd further extends the idea of the absurd into a new dimension, in which combinatoric pattern, algorithmic rule, logico-mathematical structures or other nonsignifying entities are inserted into a work, providing a fascinating depth into which we delve, eager to discover the secret underpinnings that may or may not prove meaningful to us. Hayles' concept of intermediation allows us to understand some aspects of the interplay of code and language, how underlying logic and code may or may not affect the meaning of a work. However, while some aspects of code may be recuperated into the Regime of Signification, there seems to be a less explored aspect of intermediation, of the

interplay between code and language: how to understand the nonsignifying side of intermediation, what kind of discourse might help us name and discuss the feelings generated as we find ourselves in that other, less explored terrain.

The Barthesian concept of pleasure in the act of reading helps us to explore two aspects of the nonsignifying side of intermediation – a feeling of both loss and liberation in relation to signification. This concept of pleasure seems adequately nuanced to account for the complex experience of the digital absurd, as loss is recuperated by liberation but liberation is tainted by loss.

In two very different works, *The Pleasure of the Text* and *S/Z*, Barthes elaborates his concept of pleasure and reading by suggesting that pleasure can emerge from the collision of codes within a work. Using Sade as his example, he suggests that

the pleasure of reading him clearly proceeds from certain breaks (or certain collisions): antipathetic codes (the noble and the trivial, for example) come into contact; pompous and ridiculous neologisms are created; pornographic messages are embodied in sentences so pure they might be used as grammatical models. As textual theory has it: the language is redistributed. Now, such redistribution is always achieved by cutting. Two edges are created... These two edges, the compromise they bring about, are necessary. Neither culture nor its destruction is erotic; it is the seam between them, the fault, the flaw, which becomes so (Barthes, *Pleasure*, 7)

While this example uses the term *code* in a fully linguistic sense, perhaps we can extend this to include the computer code of the digital realm. As computer code comes into contact with meaningful symbolic communication, it creates the sort of collisions to which Barthes refers. One edge of the collision is comprised of language, of proper and standard expressions accepted by culture; the other is comprised of computer

code, an underlying force with the capacity to manipulate the language that sites atop it, creating provisional and temporary edges that can easily be multiplied or reduced, further separated or rejoined.

To further explicate such edges, Barthes cites a certain kind of experimental literature that focuses on material manipulation of language:

Especially, of course (here is where the edge will be clearest), in the form of a pure materiality: the language, its lexicon, its metrics, its prosody. In Philippe Sollers's *Lois*, everything is attacked, dismantled... often it is a powerful gush of words, a ribbon of infra-language. Yet it collides with another edge: that of (decasyllabic) meter, of assonance, of plausible neologisms, of prosodic rhythms, of (quoted) truisms. The dismantling of language is intersected by political assertion, is edged by the age-old culture of the signifier (Barthes, *Pleasure*, 8)

One wonders, without taking unwarranted liberties with Barthes' thought, if this "ribbon of infra-language" could be something like the nonsignifying structures underpinning Oulipian works, or the structure of code underlying digital media?

The discourse of digital media often seems to focus more on rhetoric of liberation and polysemia than on the destruction or attenuation of meaning. We can catch a glimpse of this rhetoric by recalling the round-table discussion from the beginning of this chapter. There, Janet Murray emphasized digital media's capacity for heightening traditional narrative concepts of meaning; in this view, code is put in service of traditional structures and computational power must be constrained lest it destroy such structures. Digital media's capacity for the creation or reinforcement of meaning is certainly not to be denied, but neither is its capacity for the destruction of meaning or of recasting it into less traditional forms. In this latter view, pleasure emerges neither from the reinforcement of traditional codes nor from their destruction but rather

from the generation of seams. As these ephemeral seams come and go, we may hover on the brink of a certain kind of bliss, unable to reach the resolution of set meaning yet unable to foreclose its possibility. Perhaps the digital absurd can help bring the latter aspect into digital media discourse.

We can gain further insight into Barthes' notion of pleasure through consideration of his ideas of textuality: where the standard notion of textuality within the discourse of digital media focuses on the creation of meaning, the positive capacity for generative, limitless signification, Barthes does not seem to focus quite on this aspect. If we examine his ideas of readerly and writerly texts, we can catch a glimpse of his idea of textual pleasure. Barthes' concept of the readerly represents a traditional text which includes a small number of received meanings, pre-digested for easy signification; in contrast, his notion of the writerly text takes on a quality of nonmeaning, a mass of undifferentiated text that offers no clear meaning:

Let us first posit the image of a triumphant plural, unimpoverished by any constraint of representation (of imitation). In this ideal text, the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can reach, they are indeterminable ... the systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text, but their number is never closed, based as it is on the infinity of language ... All of which comes down to saying that for the plural text, there cannot be a narrative structure, a grammar, or a logic; thus, if one or another of these structures are permitted to come forward, it is in proportion... as we are dealing with incompletely plural texts, texts whose plural is more or less parsimonious (Barthes, *S/Z*, 6).

Once meaning has taken hold, we can imagine that Barthes would become dissatisfied, yearning instead for the uncertainty that preceded the settling of meaning, wanting to hover just outside of meaning. This is the territory of Barthesian pleasure, and perhaps this is part of the pleasure of the digital absurd. Such a notion seems very far from Murray's view of the pleasure of digital media, where pleasure issues from the heightening of traditional structures and not from the suspension or unsettling of meaning.

In the concluding chapter, we shall give further consideration to a connection between Barthesian thinking and digital media.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

6.1 Barthes' Concept of The Neutral

Late in his career, in a series of lectures at the Collège de France, Roland Barthes developed the concept of “the neutral” to address a particular tension – one whose influence stretches across his lifetime of work. The neutral suggests a paradox that refuses to take sides and refuses to choose when confronted with a binary opposition. In other words, the neutral refuses to conform to the doxa, or received meaning – in Barthes’ words, “the neutral is that which baffles the paradigm” (Barthes, *Neutral*, 6). A vignette from Barthes’ childhood, recounted in his autobiography, lends a visceral image to his theoretical discussion of the neutral:

When I used to play prisoner’s base in the Luxembourg, what I liked best was not provoking the other team and boldly exposing myself to their right to take me prisoner; what I liked best was to free the prisoners – the effect of which was to put both teams back into circulation: the game started over again at zero. In the great game of the powers of speech, we also play prisoner’s base: one language has only temporary rights over another; all it takes is for a third language to appear from the ranks for the assailant to be forced to retreat: in the conflict of rhetorics, the victory never goes to any but the Third Language. The task of this language is to release the prisoners: to scatter the signified, the catechisms (Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, 50).

Such a memory suggests an early indication of a complicated relationship with language, meaning, and nonmeaning, and much of Barthes’ intellectual career would

develop around this relationship. Through the years, Barthes took many different positions around this question, beginning with his earliest works; he writes of “a process that struck me as early as *Writing Degree Zero* and has obsessed me ever since: what is produced against signs, outside of signs, what is expressly produced so as not to be a sign is very quickly recuperated as a sign” (Barthes, *Neutral*, 26). This comment reflects the way in which his work seeks to occupy the space between meaning and nonmeaning – the space just before meaning takes hold. Much of Barthes’ thinking is devoted to understanding how meaning takes hold, and how the process might be thwarted to create a fantasy of nonmeaning:

Evidently he dreams of a world which would be *exempt from meaning* (as one is from military service). This began with *Writing Degree Zero*, in which is imagined “the absence of every sign”; subsequently, a thousand affirmations incidental to this dream (apropos of the avant-garde text, of Japan, of music, of the alexandrine, etc.).

Curious that in public opinion, precisely, there should be a version of this dream; *Doxa*, too has no love for meaning, which in its eyes makes the mistake of conferring upon life a kind of infinite intelligibility (which cannot be determined, arrested): it counters the invasion of meaning by the concrete; the concrete is what is supposed to resist meaning (Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, 87)

His interest in structural linguistics (*The Elements of Semiology*), secondary processes of signification (*Mythologies*), and readerly and writerly texts (*S/Z*) all address processes of signification, how meaning takes hold and gradually becomes rooted, impervious to change, becomes *Doxa*. His works differ markedly in sensibility, from the highly structuralist *The Elements of Semiology* to the rather poetic *The Neutral*, but

all can be seen as revolving around these central questions. Convention and stereotype are no friends to Barthes, but more than that, language and form themselves seem to be enemies in some ways; we saw this with his concept of the writerly, which in some ways sounds like an ideal entity in which meaning plays no role. At the same time, Barthes the passionate writer depends entirely on language to express great depths of feeling. In this way, Barthes seems himself to embody something of an absurd contradiction.

Contradictions abound in Barthes' thinking. In discussing the concept of the Neutral, Barthes relates an episode involving a spilled bottle of ink which leads him to ponder another sort of contradiction:

Finally, a personal incident, which will nicely introduce the figures to come: Thursday, March 9, fine afternoon, I go out to buy some paints (Sennelier inks) → bottles of pigment: following my taste for the names (golden yellow, sky blue, brilliant green, purple, sun yellow, cartham pink – a rather intense pink), I buy sixteen bottles. In putting them away, I knock one over: in sponging up, I make a new mess: little domestic complications... And now, I am going to give you the official name of the spilled color, a name printed on the small bottle (as on the others vermilion, turquoise, etc.): it was the color called Neutral (obviously I had opened this bottle first to see what kind of color was this Neutral about which I am going to be speaking for thirteen weeks). Well, I was both punished and disappointed: punished because Neutral spatters and stains (it's a type of dull gray-black); disappointed because Neutral is a color like the others, and for sale (therefore, Neutral is not unmarketable): the unclassifiable is classified → all the more reason for us to go back to discourse, which, at least, cannot say what the Neutral is (Barthes, *Neutral*, 48).

In this moment, Barthes notes in passing the contradiction involved in the concept of the Neutral – the odd notion that a color called “Neutral” retains a positive quality, indeed can stain and besmirch in unintended ways. Over his course of lectures on the neutral, Barthes pursues the concept through thirty “figures” intended to develop it further, to display the contradictions, humor, play, and pleasure of nonsense involved in frustrating the paradigm of standard oppositions, understandings, and meanings.

In a similar way, perhaps code (or more specifically, the oscillation between language and code) offers us another figure of the neutral, releasing the prisoners/meanings help captive by the Regime of Signification and putting them back into circulation in the unformed terrain between code and language. In several of our examples, from the proto-digital works of the Oulipo and Goldsmith to the genuinely digital Dada Engine and Montfort’s Minimal Poetry Generators, we see the odd double-logic of code at work and at play, where it simultaneously creates and drains meaning away from the work, creating new meanings while at the same time effacing others, and at other times turning our attention away from meaning altogether.

6.2 *Review*

Spanish author Javier Marías writes a humorous and thought-provoking passage concerning Botox, or botulinum toxin, reflecting on its odd dual nature:

...it seemed to me both incredible and ironic that a solution or dose of that once-feared toxin...should now be used to the advantage of the wealthy, to pander to their every caprice and luxury, to postpone their wrinkles or eliminate them for a few months, using the same elements of muscular paralysis or anesthetized or damaged nerves...the same elements which in days gone by brought on dizziness and growing immobility and a lack of coordination and double vision and serious intestinal problems, followed by aphasia and then asphyxia and total paralysis and which,

in the end, killed. Yes, everything is painfully ridiculous and subjective and partial, because everything contains its opposite and depends entirely on the moment and the place and the virulence and the dosage, delivering either sickness or vaccination, either death or beautification, just as all love carries within itself its own staleness and every desire its own satiety and every longing its own ennui... (Marías, *Dance and Dream*, 174).

Of course, botulinum toxin has little to do with digital media, but we might appropriate the concept that “everything contains its opposite” for our discussion of digital media, code, and language. In our concept of the digital absurd, we have seen ways in which the code of a digital computer, the ne plus ultra of the rational, contains or conjures a complex web of feelings, including irrational humor, play, contradiction, and despair. From a strict environment of bits and logical operations, somehow a sensibility of the absurd can emerge.

Our overarching goal has been to develop a concept, through close analysis of several texts, broad enough to contribute an understanding how such a sensibility can emerge from the digital. This required both a detailed analysis of the philosophical background of the absurd and a careful review of absurd drama and literature; later, it required that we extend the concept of the absurd to cover other works, introducing a new set of characteristics alongside those more recognizable from the traditional absurd. Finally, armed with this expanded concept of the absurd, we explored its manifestations in the realm of the digital, considering in depth three artifacts.

As we developed the concept of the digital absurd, we considered the following points:

- Through a collection of everyday episodes, we gathered a set of intuitions and feelings associated with digital experience. Ryan’s game raised questions about meaning amidst algorithmic repetition of a computer game; Apple’s “Movies”

widget produced a humorous unintended juxtaposition of two very different films, drawing our attention to the underlying level of code that produced the error; the flood of messages delivered to us via email, Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, and other channels turned our attention to the possible proliferative quality of the digital; and the play/humor and structure/algorithm of Oulipian works led us to wonder about the odd mix of characteristics that make that body of work a compelling representative of the digital sensibility.

- For help unraveling this complex web of feelings, we turned to philosophy, and specifically to Camus' concept of the absurd, which deals squarely with issues of meaning. In Camus' writing, we saw how everyday events and routines can draw meaning into question, suggesting a partial explanation for our episodes of digital discomfort. Camus defines the absurd sensibility as an inability to accept ultimate, transcendent explanations for existence, yet he insists there is a fundamental human desire for such explanations. But pure reason provides him with little solace and leaves him wanting more. This aspect of Camus' thought also resonates with our episodes, where the ability to explain the mechanism of the digital exhaustively still fails to provide a satisfying explanation of our experience. Camus provides us with the notion of a rift in human existence: the human's insatiable desire for explanation of existence, and the world's stubborn refusal to give it. We appropriate this very broad notion to the more specific experience of the digital, translating the gap between human and world into a more specific form of the gap between meaning and code, or between the observable, signifying content on the surface and the latent, nonsignifying code underpinning it. Underneath the observable phenomena of the digital (which may at times manifest characteristics of repetition, proliferation, imperfect imitations of human qualities) there is a level of code which is ultimately precise and knowable. We imagine this realm and may indeed be tempted to observe it

directly in an attempt to come to grips with the digital – as if underlying levels of code hold out hope of an ultimate meaning but prove in the end to provide little.

- Mathematician John Allen Paulos takes up the notion of rift and provides it with a more comic interpretation. Where Camus found reason for a creative frenzy in the wake of a profound despair, Paulos adds an element of comedy to the dark interpretations of Camus. This seems essential to a complete understanding of the absurd, which in many respects is an intermingling of the downcast, the creative, and the comic.
- Jean Baudrillard provides us with a bridge between Camus' thinking about the broad issue of transcendent meaning and the more specific issues of linguistic meaning and structural considerations; he also provides a counterpoint to Camus' thought, in some ways. Camus generally accepts the notion that the depth of existence may hold the key to ultimate meaning; he suggests that we can never know this meaning but are bound to persist in trying to locate it. In discussing ideas of language, Baudrillard reviews and dismisses the notion that a deep layer of meaning can be discovered in the depth or structure of language or poetry. Instead, he finds a source of pleasure in the *dissipation of meaning* involved in linguistic structure. Baudrillard gives us the notion of the pleasure of the negative in contrast to Camus' longing for a positive meaning underlying existence. Both notions – of uncovering positive meaning and of taking pleasure in its absence – seem to be at work in the digital absurd.
- Continuing to explore the characteristics of the absurd, we turned to the absurdist drama and literature of Pinter and Beckett. This allowed us to explore a collection of characteristics including failures of communication, messy proliferation, mindless repetition, identity confusion, and an emphasis on squalor

or despair. In Beckett's trilogy, we continued to see examples of this variety of absurd, but we also began to see signs of a different category of absurd: an excruciating focus on detail, regularity in the recurrence of elements, and hints of an underlying governing structure. Where the former qualities suggest a despairing-yet-darkly-comic view of humanity, the latter impart a different sensibility of control, neatness, structure, and regularity. These differences lead us to suggest two categories of absurd, the linguistic and the logical, to capture these two sensibilities.

- The linguistic absurd and the logical absurd provided us with an expanded view of the absurd – one that ultimately may capture different aspects of the digital sensibility. Like Beckett's trilogy, Roussel's *Impressions of Africa* allowed us to explore both types of absurd within the same work. The bizarre nature of the Incomparables' performances and the uncontextualized, detailed descriptions of them impart of feeling of nonsense. But alongside these bizarre qualities, Roussel's work features stronger elements of the logical absurd: the detailed descriptions of inventions and performances create a sensibility of absurdity through detail rather than through strangeness, and later in the novel we come to suspect a larger governing structure through the book's large pattern of repetition. Roussel's later novel, *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, reveals in great detail the structures and methods he used to create the bizarre scenes and characters of the book. While we might expect such insight into the underlying structure to enlighten us and make us understand the novel more fully, it seems to have the opposite effect. Foucault suggests that this "key" to the work paradoxically serves to make it stranger, to undermine our understanding of it – for it seems inevitably incomplete and makes us question whether there might be other "keys" that might provide clearer, more satisfying, more final explanations. (We sense here a distant echo of Camus' sensibility.) Georges

Perec's novel, *Life A User's Manual*, gives us the strongest example of the logical absurd; here the qualities of the linguistic absurd have largely disappeared, and the qualities of the logical absurd have come to the fore.

- Armed with concepts of the linguistic and logical absurd, we explored the realm of the digital, first considering Katherine Hayles' concept of intermediation, which strives to understand the complex entanglements resulting from the intermingling of language and code. Hayles explores in detail the linguistic theory of Saussure and Derrida, suggesting how it does and does not fit into the linguistic worldview; this imperfection of fit seems to be at the heart of some of our experiences of the digital absurd. While the imperfect fit may be a source of discomfort, Hayles follows Moretti in suggesting a more positive characterization of the duality – that through “distant reading” we can see meaningful structures and patterns heretofore unknown to us. In this way, Hayles seems to focus on a notion of intermediation in which code and language collaborate to create meaning. However, it seems that another, darker and more disjunctive vision could also be suggested of the code/language relationship, and this aspect also has a place in our idea of the digital absurd. These two visions – the positive and the dark – suggest a tension between the issues of meaning and nonmeaning in our relationship with the digital.

Coming to the end of a long-developed concept, we are in a position to attempt to answer the question: What is the digital absurd? A tentative answer: The concept of the digital absurd consists of a set of qualities that helps us understand certain feelings that may arise in our digital experience, such as joy and despair, groundedness and unmooredness, nonsense and sense, humor and despondence. These digital qualities include the propensity for certain kinds of excess that occur manifestly in the products of the digital – repetition, proliferation, or imperfect attempts at human

understanding – qualities which align most closely with the notion of the linguistic absurd. Another set of digital qualities activates our awareness of an underlying realm of code and whets our appetite to look into this realm to find meaning; these align most closely with the concept of the logical absurd. Together, these qualities of the digital absurd may partially explain the complex set of feelings that digital interaction can engender.

One might well argue that the concept of the digital absurd is simply based on a single category mistake – that we simply should not seek meaning within the non-signifying realm of code and algorithm and should not allow it to affect our experience of the digital. We should not seek the transcendent when we interact with digital media nor expect to find great meaning buried within language any more than we should attempt to locate God within industrial machinery. But I believe we cannot simply suspend our human desire for meaning when we come into contact with the digital; in this we may find a very distant echo of Camus, who would like nothing more than to suspend his desire for truth but knows he cannot.

We may also find a less distant echo of Barthes, who entertains the notion of an existence free of signification but knows this is a fantasy. For Barthes, one response to this unachievable end is to develop a new category, and we follow him in this, suggesting the digital absurd as another figure of the neutral – neither pure language nor pure code, neither nonsignifying nor signifying, neither perfectly joyous and playful nor entirely despairing and frustrating. Barthes found pleasure in the edge, the contact between two realms, and the digital absurd allows us access to a similar kind of pleasure in the uncomfortable friction between the two realms of language and code, where meaning is both created and destroyed. There is something of this in the Oulipo, who might be seen as early visionaries of this kind of pleasure.

In Barthes' 1957 preface to *Mythologies*, he suggests that the flavor of that era made sarcasm an understandable and natural response: "What I claim is to live to

the full the contradiction of my time, which may well make sarcasm the condition of truth” (Barthes, *Mythologies*, 123). Perhaps in our digital era, we can modify this idea to suggest that the absurd is the condition of truth – or at least an important component of the contemporary sensibility.

Far from a thoroughly downcast sensibility, the digital absurd allows us to retain the power to laugh at nonsense, or to question it, or to question the tension between meaning and meaninglessness. In this sense we retain superiority over these elements. Like Beckett, we concede the possibility of a certain emptiness of the digital experience, but in the very act of granting it we assert a kind of authority, the authority of an amused critique.

Of course, this view of the digital can be only partial and incomplete: Any attempt to characterize something as complex as digital media is bound to be so. But like Laurel’s view of digital media through the lens of theater, or Murray’s through narrative, or Manovich’s through avant-garde film, viewing digital media through the lens of the absurd gives us access to a certain sensibility we might not otherwise be able to locate.

APPENDIX A

IMPRESSIONS OF AFRICA MAPPING

A.1 Impressions of Africa *Section Summaries*

Table 2: *Impressions of Africa* Section Summaries, Part One

Section	Summary
I.1 (1)	We see an initial view of Talu VII, Ejur, Trophies Square, and The Incomparables Club
I.2 (2)	Surrounded by three objects (bowler hat with word PINCEE, suede glove marked with C, and a note bearing caricatures), Nair weaves a fine fabric
I.3 (3)	An apparatus displays images of warriors and battle, unfurling on a parchment
I.4 (4)	An altar displays several clues: Reigning House of Ponukele-Drelshkaf, a portrait of two Spanish girls, the name SUAN, a genealogical table, and two trees
I.5 (5)	Other oddities accrue: A model of the Paris Bourse, life-size statues (Saradikis the Helot, Immanuel Kant, Philip of Orleans bowing before the child-king Louis XV), a cabin made of canvas and book pages
I.6 (6)	A Zouave uniform and weapons are arranged in a shrine; A series of paintings, beginning with Flora and Sergeant-Major Lecurou, depict a complex relationship of romance, jealousy, and abuse

- I.7 (7) A shed holds four prisoners, while passengers from the Lynceus await a show...
- II.1 (8) As festivities begin, Talu's thirty-six sons appear, followed by Talu VII, in a long blue dress.
- II.2 (9) The crowd assembles on the esplanade.
- II.3 (10) A massive die chooses six sons to bear Talu's train, and the Emperor is dressed in an elaborate robe showing his empire.
- II.4 (11) After Talu is proclaimed Emperor of Ponukele and Drelshkaf, he receives a holy ampulla and proclaims his victory over the dead Yaour.
- II.5 (12) Talu's wives belch-dance the Luen' Shetuz.
- II.6 (13) Rao beheads the prisoners Gaiz Duh (with a bloodless axe) and Mossem (burning the words of his false decree into his soles).
- II.7 (14) Rao executes Rul with the gold pins she so coveted.
- II.8 (15) Louise Montalescot emerges from her canvas cabin; her tame magpie sets statuary of the Helot into motion.
- II.9 (16) The magpie causes Immanuel Kant's bust to illuminate brilliantly.
- II.10 (17) Finally, the magpie animates the remaining statues: Sister Perpetua and the Regent of Orleans.
- III.1 (18) The Incomparables performance beginning, the miniature Bourse opens for the last time.
- III.2 (19) The four Bucharessas brothers juggle in a mirror-like configuration.
- III.3 (20) Marius Bucharessas releases cats dressed in green and red ribbons, who play a game of Prisoner's Base.
- III.4 (21) Bob Bucharesses imitates sounds with astounding realism.

- III.5 (22) Stella Bucharessas cycles while showering gold coins on the ground.
- III.6(23) The marksman Balbet demonstrates his skill by shooting an egg white away from the yolk; he then engages in a duel with La Billaudiere-Maisonniel's automatic fencing machine.
- III.7(24) Rhejed flies into the sky, attached to an enormous bird of prey by the sticky secretion of a rodent.
- III.8 (25) The chemist Bex demonstrates his automatic orchestra, fueled by his invention bexium.
- III.9 (26) Bex choreographs a display of buttons and pencils, controlled by the properties of magnetine and impervium.
- III.10 (27) The Hungarian Skariofszky displays a huge worm, trained to drop heavy water onto strings to create music.
- IV.1 (28) Talu performs Daricelli's Aubade in dress and wig.
- IV.2 (29) Juillard lectures fluently on the history of the electors of Brandenburg.
- IV.3 (30) The ichthyologist Martingnon presents a previously unknown sturgeon-skate.
- IV.4 (31) The quadriplegic Tancred Bucharessas appears as a one-man band.
- IV.5 (32) Ludovic, the singer with four voices, performs rounds of Frere Jacques in solo.
- IV.6 (33) Jenn presents Phillippo, whose miniscule body allows the appearance of a detached head.
- IV.7 (34) Lelgoualch plays a flute fashioned from his own tibia.
- IV.8 (35) Urbain the circus trainer presents Romulus, a horse that speaks.

- IV.9 (36) Wirligig the clown builds miniature buildings of coins, dominos, and cards.
- IV.10 (37) Cuijper, the tenor, presents his squeaker, which amplifies his voice a hundredfold.
- IV.11 (38) The tragic actress Adinolfia emotionally declaims the verse of Tasso.
- V.1 (39) Soreau's tableaux vivant show the Gods on Olympus, Ursula and the bewitched people, Handel composing his Vesper, Alexis and the assassin Plehtcheiev, scents in the woods of Argyros, and the kleptomaniac Prince Savellini.
- V.2 (40) The obese and old ballerina Olga Chervonenkova attempts the Dance of the Nymph, with disastrous results.
- V.3 (41) Carmichael forgets the final verse of the Jeruka, angering Talu.
- VI.1 (42) The entire congregation reassembles in the magnificent garden, the Behuliphruen.
- VI.2 (43) Stephen Alcott and his six sons arrange themselves for the perfect echo.
- VI.3 (44) The witch-doctor Bashku restores Sirdah's sight in the waters of the Tez.
- VI.4 (45) Bedu demonstrates his automatic loom, fueled by the current of the Tez.
- VI.5 (46) The sculptor Fuxier creates apparitions in the Tez with his remarkable pastilles: Perseus and Medusa, dancers at a feast, a poet robbed of his verse, a wind-clock, and Prince Conti and his jay.
- VI.6 (47) Luxo shows portraits of Argentinian Ballesteros, painted in fire-works.

- VI.7 (48) Jizme is executed by the cruel chance of lightening.
- VII.1 (49) The hypnotist Darriand leads the madman Seil Kor onto stage.
- VII.2 (50) To recover Seil Kor's lost memory, Darriand projects images of episodes from his personal history, which he mistakes for reality.
- VII.3 (51) The children Kalj and Meisdehl arrive in a musical chariot to enact recovered scenes from *Romeo and Juliet*.
- VII.4 (52) Romeo sees smoky visions of Pheior of Alexandria.
- VII.5 (53) Romeo and Juliet continue to act out unknown passages from the famous drama.
- VII.6 (54) Fuxier ripens a bunch of grapes with tiny figures at the center.
- VII.7 (55) Fuxier's grapes: Odo being sewn up by a demon.
- VII.8 (56) Fuxier's grapes: A Roman crowd watches a fight between gladiators.
- VII.9 (57) Fuxier's grapes: Napoleon in Spain is unpopular with his subjects.
- VII.10 (58) Fuxier's grapes: Images from the Gospel of St Luke.
- VII.11 (59) Fuxier's grapes: Hans the woodcutter with his six sons.
- VII.12 (60) Fuxier's grapes: Rousseau's Emile experiences the first pangs of love.
- VII.13 (61) Fuxier's grapes: An angel duels with Satan, in a recreation of a painting by Raphael.
- VII.14 (62) Fuxier departs.
- VIII.1 (63) Fogar appears, with violet flower, a bed, a plant, a lamp, and other accoutrements.
- VIII.2 (64) Fogar falling into a death-like sleep, the plant begins to display a series of images from the Poet and the Morisco.

- VIII.3 (65) Fogar awakens, and with the violet flower removes three clots from his veins; these provide a meal for the bizarre creatures alongside him.
- VIII.4 (66) A second creature enjoys a meal of Fogar's clot.
- VIII.5 (67) A third creature devours a clot.
- VIII.6 (68) A sponge containing a miniature human heart rejects water completely.
- VIII.7 (69) A breeze causes an apparently lifeless disc to animate.
- VIII.8 (70) A gelatinous block, placed on a rough and uncomfortable surface, sprouts spinning arms.
- VIII.9 (71) A bow, dragged across a black horse-hair, plays two notes simultaneously.
- VIII.10 (72) A burning candle creates realistic-sounding thunder.
- VIII.11 (73) Marius Bucharessas is awarded The Grand Decoration of the Order of the Delta, indicating his superior performance.
- VIII.12 (74) All depart and retire to bed.
- IX.1 (75) The next morning, Louise Montalescot emerges from her canvas cabin to demonstrate her feat of painting.
- IX.2 (76) Louise prepares her complicated apparatus.
- IX.3 (77) The automatic arm of Louise's apparatus begins painting an image of the Behuliphruen.
- IX.4 (78) The automatic painting is completed, with impressive results.
- IX.5 (79) In a second demonstration, Louise's apparatus completes a pencil drawing of the crowd posed as "passers-by in a street".
- IX.6 (80) Carmichael repeats the last verse of the Jerika, this time remembering correctly.

Table 3: *Impressions of Africa* Section Summaries, Part
Two

Section	Summary
X.1 (1)	Narrator reviews the list of passengers on the Lynceus.
X.2 (2)	The Lynceus shipwrecked, the passengers meet the native Seil Kor, who has come to take the passengers to Emperor Talu VII. Seil Kor recounts his story, beginning with his meeting a French explorer and meeting his enchanting daughter Nina, who tragically dies after a forest outing.
X.3 (3)	Seil Kor recomposes himself after recounting his tragic story.
X.4 (4)	Seil Kor tells the history of Talu, beginning with patriarch Suan, whose marriage to two Spanish girls begat two lines of warring descendants, Talu and Yaour.
XI.1 (5)	Seil Kor continues with the story of Talu's private life.
XI.2 (6)	Talu's wife Rul finds beautiful gold pins on a shipwreck victim and takes them as her own. She gives birth to first daughter Sirdah, whom she shuns because of her squinting eyes.
XI.3 (7)	Rul's affair with Talu's prime minister Mossem produces a son; the pair successfully conspire to dispose of Sirdah, leaving their son as heir.
XI.4 (8)	Wanting to conceal his affair with Rul, Mossem weds Jizme, who in turn takes as a lover Nair (who weaves fine mosquito nets); Nair and Jizme conspire to meet surreptitiously in the Emperor's garden, under Talu's nose. But Mossem uncovers the plan, using a bowler hat and glove to expose the pair.

- XI.5 (9) Sirdah absent for 17 years, Talu adopts Miesdehl, who reminds him of his lost Sirdah.
- XI.6 (10) From the flames of the burning Vorrh, Sirdah emerges with her savior, the Zouave Velbar. Mossem and Rul's conspiracy is exposed.... As a conscript, Velbar had performed brilliantly in the opera Daedalus, to the chagrin of his superior, Sergeant-Major Lecurou, and to the interest of Lecurou's mistress Flora. Flora consults the fortune teller Angelica. Discovering their tryst, Lecurou rejects Flora, who meets her end in a gambling den. Velbar cannot restrain himself from disrespecting the hateful Lecurou, and flees, ending up in the Vorrh.
- XI.7 (11) Wounded in the fire, Velbar dies and is commemorated in Trophies Square.
- XI.8 (12) Talu spares Rul but resolves torturous punishment for the treacherous Mossem, Nair, and Jizme.
- XI.9 (13) Seeking revenge, Rul conspires with Bashku to blind Sirdah, but is caught in the process.
- XII.1 (14) The Lynceus passengers are taken to Ejur, where Talu seeks ransom from their families.
- XII.2 (15) To ease their boredom, Juillard proposes performances of a club he names "The Incomparables".
- XII.3 (16) Further, he proposes a prize called the "delta" for the superior performance.

- XII.4 (17) The Incomparables begin preparations: former ballerina Olga and The Dance of the Nymph; Juillard and his lecture on the electors of Brandenburg; Balbet's display of marksmanship; the duel with La Billaudiere-Maisonnial's fencing machine; Luxo's fireworks; Martignon's fish.
- XII.5 (18) Eleven of twelve musical chariots were damaged in the shipwreck, leaving only upper C, which Talu confiscates for Kalj's use.
- XIII.1 (19) Carmichael inaugurates the Incomparables stage and tells his story of performing in women's clothing, sewing the number 472 onto his dress.
- XIII.2 (20) Talu demands that Carmichael teach him to sing in falsetto.
- XIII.3 (21) Adinolfi finds in Miesdehl unexpected dramatic talent. Adinolfi, living in London, had discovered a hidden manuscript containing unknown scenes from Romeo and Juliet, including a prologue showing formative experiences of each child and a final scene which recalls images from the prologue.
- XIV.1 (22) Juillard proposed the establishment of a Bourse for speculation on the success of each Incomparable.
- XIV.2 (23) In addition to the Banquet of the Gods on Olympus, Soreau prepares stories from five continents; in the first, the evil Gervaise, Agatha, Claude, and Justin into she-ass, goose, boar, and pike.
- XIV.3 (24) Soreau continued: In England, the blind Handel composes his Vesper from 23 random notes marked on a staircase.
- XIV.4 (25) Soreau continued: In Russia, the czar Alexis finds the killer of Plehtcheiev with fraudulent help from above.

- XIV.5 (26) Soreau continued: In Greece, Canaris repeats the names of flowers in the Argyros, each mysteriously accompanied by its scent.
- XIV.6 (27) Soreau continued: In Italy, Prince Savellini pursues his vice of stealing from the poor.
- XIV.7 (28) The Incomparables discuss how to stage each of these scenes.
- XIV.8 (29) Carmichael plans to announce the subject of each scene.
- XV.1 (30) The Emperor's son Fogar, using his ability to slip into a death-like state, walks under the sea. He brings back several strange creatures, which he discovers feast animatedly on the clots he removes from his veins. Fogar also claims that the fur of a certain rodent can be used to play two notes simultaneously; he uses a thunder-creating candle to attract the rodents and demonstrate the strange quality to Bex.
- XV.2 (31) At the bottom of the Tez, Fogar discovers a plant that records and replays a succession of images. Later, he records images from the tale of the Poet and the Morisco into the plant.
- XV.3 (32) Fogar contrives a means to display all of these odd discoveries in the Incomparables show, even from his deathlike sleep.
- XVI.1 (33) In the Behuliphruen, Skariofszky discovers a spring of heavy water and an enormous worm, which he trains to play his zither.
- XVII.1 (34) Rhejed discovers a rodent with a gluelike secretion and a bird powerfully attracted to its scent, and he contrives a plan for an impressive aerial display.
- XVIII.1 (35) Yaour's ambassador Gaiz Duh alerts Talu of Yaour's treacherous plan, allowing Talu to vanquish the rival king.
- XIX.1 (36) Louise Montalescot's obsessive goal involves creating an automatic drawing machine.

- XIX.2 (37) Louise befriends a talented and friendly magpie, who accompanied the Montaleseots on their quest to locate a special oil essential to her invention. Falling into Yaour's hands, Louise and the potentate become lovers.
- XX.1 (38) Yaour now dead, Talu plans a proclamation of the unification of Ponukele-Drelshkar under his rule alongside the Incomparables show.
- XX.2 (39) On the same day, the traitors Gaiz Duh, Rul, and Jizme would be executed, while Nair would be spared for his high-quality mosquito nets.
- XX.3 (40) Sirdah's sight would be restored by Bashku in the Tez; despite her attachment to the defeated Yaour, Louise would be spared pending the success of her invention.
- XX.4 (41) Chenevillot creates apparatus for the punishments of Nair and Jizme.
- XXI.1 (42) Talu makes a challenging demand of the Montaleseots: A moveable and life-sized statue to be set in motion by the magpie alone. Louise selects as a subject the story of the helot Saridakis, who is punished with death for failing his lesson.
- XXI.2 (43) Louise selects additional subjects: Kant, Sister Perpetua, and Louis XV.
- XXII.1 (44) Talu orders Carmichael to sing the last verse of the Jeruka from memory.
- XXII.2 (45) A huge die would choose 6 of Talu's 36 sons to carry the train of his dress.
- XXII.3 (46) Talu's drawings of the history of his people would be displayed, scrolling automatically.

- XXIII.1 (47) Bedu employs his loom to create an elaborate state robe for Talu, showing his lands.
- XXIII.2 (48) Fuxier chooses scenes to display with his remarkable pastilles: Perseus and Medusa, a Spanish fiesta, the poet Gaipolu deprived of his verse, a wind-clock, and the story of Prince of Conti's affair.
- XXIV.1 (49) Gaiz Duh, now a prisoner, escapes briefly, striking Seil Kor as he is recaptured. Seil Kor loses all memory, giving Darriand an idea for a display.
- XXIV.2 (50) Fuxier complements his pastilles by creating a bunch of grapes with ten images within.
- XXV.1 (51) Talu fixes the date of the coronation, and Martingnon announces his discovery of a new and unknown fish.
- XXV.2 (52) Last preparations for the coronation include the holy ampulla, and the egg for Balbet's demonstration of marksmanship.
- XXV.3 (53) Olga prepares her Dance of the Nymph, which she performed as a young and slender ballerina.
- XXV.4 (54) Louise and magpie finalize preparations for their displays.
- XXV.5 (55) Prisoners Mossem, Gaiz Duh, Jizme, and Rul are shut into their cage.
- XXV.6 (56) Talu appears and the festivities begin.
- XXV.7 (57) The reader knows of the coronation, the gala performance, Louise Montalescot's performance, and Carmichael's detention.
- XXVI.1 (58) Carmichael redeems himself to Talu, reciting the last verse perfectly, and the captives depart.
- XXVI.2 (59) After several days' journey, all are returned to France.

A.2 Most Common Words in Summaries

adinolfa	coronation	helot	mosquito	shipwreck
alexis	darriand	immanuel	mossem	sirdah
ampulla	delta	incomparables	nair	skariofszky
argyros	dress	jeruka	olga	soreau
balbet	duel	jizme	olympus	spanish
ballerina	egg	juillard	orleans	suan
bashku	ejur	juliet	pastilles	talu
bedu	emperor	kant	perpetua	tez
behuliphruen	fencing	lecurou	perseus	train
bex	fireworks	loom	pins	trophies
billaudiere-maisonnial	fish	louis xv	plehtcheiev	velbar
blind	flora	louise	poet	vesper
bourse	fogar	lynceus	rao	violet
bowler	fuxier	magpie	rhejed	vorrh
brandenburg	gaiz duh	marius	robe	wind-clock
bucharessas	girls	martingnon	rodent	worm
cabin	glove	medusa	romeo	yaour
candle	gold	miesdehl	rul	zouave
carmichael	grapes	montalescot	savellini	
clot	handel	morisco	seil kor	

A.3 Perl Code for Mapping Between Sections Based on Common Words

```
open(WORDS, "words.txt");
# read a list of common words from section summaries
# there are reproduced in Appendix A Section 2
while(<WORDS>) {
    chomp;
    push(@words, $_);
}
close WORDS;

open(1, "africa.txt");
# read section summaries from part 1 of Impressions of Africa
# there are reproduced in Appendix A Section 1, Table 1
# as we read each summary, check for matches of common words
# and note which section summary ($line) contained the word
while(<1>) {
    $line++;
    chomp;
    $_ = lc($_);
    foreach $w (@words) {
        push(@{$tally->{$w}->{1}}, $line) if (/ $w /);
    }
}
close 1;

$line = 0;
open(2, "africa2.txt");
# read section summaries from part 2 of Impressions of Africa
# there are reproduced in Appendix A Section 1, Table 2
# as we read each summary, check for matches of common words
# and note which section summary ($line) contained the word
while(<2>) {
    $line++;
    chomp;
    $_ = lc($_);
    foreach $w (@words) {
        push(@{$tally->{$w}->{2}}, $line) if (/ $w /);
    }
}
close 2;

# for each word in the list of common words, check to see if
# there are matches in both parts 1 and 2 of the book
# if there are, print all pairs of matching sections from
# both parts
foreach $w (keys %$tally) {
    if ( ($tally->{$w}->{1}) && ($tally->{$w}->{2}) ) {
        foreach $one (@{$tally->{$w}->{1}}) {
            foreach $two (@{$tally->{$w}->{2}}) {
                print "$one $two\n";
            }
        }
    }
}

}
```

Figure 38: Perl Code for Mapping Between Sections Based on Common Words

A.4 Mappings Between Sections Based on Common Words

1,2	8,51	12,9	24,30	41,42	61,50
1,4	8,56	12,12	24,34	41,44	62,48
1,5	8,58	12,14	25,30	41,45	62,50
1,6	10,2	12,18	26,30	41,46	63,30
1,7	10,4	12,20	27,10	41,47	63,31
1,8	10,5	12,35	27,33	41,51	63,32
1,9	10,6	12,38	27,45	41,56	64,30
1,11	10,7	12,42	28,2	41,57	64,31
1,12	10,8	12,44	28,4	41,58	64,32
1,14	10,9	12,45	28,5	42,33	64,48
1,15	10,10	12,46	28,6	44,6	65,19
1,17	10,12	12,47	28,7	44,7	65,30
1,18	10,14	12,51	28,8	44,9	65,31
1,19	10,18	12,56	28,9	44,10	65,32
1,20	10,19	12,58	28,12	44,13	66,19
1,28	10,20	13,7	28,14	44,31	66,30
1,32	10,30	13,8	28,18	44,40	66,31
1,35	10,33	13,10	28,19	45,31	66,32
1,38	10,35	13,12	28,20	45,40	67,19
1,42	10,38	13,35	28,35	45,47	67,30
1,44	10,42	13,39	28,38	46,31	72,30
1,45	10,44	13,49	28,42	46,40	73,16
1,46	10,45	13,55	28,44	46,48	75,36
1,47	10,46	14,6	28,45	46,50	75,37
1,51	10,47	14,7	28,46	47,17	75,40
1,56	10,51	14,8	28,47	48,8	75,42

1,58	10,56	14,10	28,51	48,12	75,43
2,8	10,58	14,12	28,56	48,39	75,54
2,12	11,2	14,13	28,58	48,41	75,57
2,39	11,4	14,38	29,15	48,55	76,36
2,41	11,5	14,39	29,17	49,2	76,37
4,4	11,6	14,55	29,22	49,3	76,40
4,48	11,7	15,36	30,51	49,4	76,42
5,22	11,8	15,37	35,10	49,5	76,43
5,42	11,9	15,40	35,33	49,49	76,54
5,43	11,12	15,42	35,45	50,2	76,57
6,10	11,14	15,43	38,21	50,3	77,33
7,1	11,18	15,54	39,23	50,4	77,36
7,2	11,20	15,57	39,24	50,5	77,37
7,14	11,30	16,37	39,25	50,49	77,40
8,2	11,35	16,42	39,26	51,21	77,42
8,4	11,37	16,43	39,27	52,21	77,43
8,5	11,38	16,54	40,17	53,21	77,54
8,6	11,40	17,37	40,53	54,48	77,57
8,7	11,42	17,42	41,2	54,50	79,36
8,8	11,44	17,43	41,4	55,48	79,37
8,9	11,45	17,54	41,5	55,50	79,40
8,12	11,46	18,15	41,6	56,48	79,42
8,14	11,47	18,17	41,7	56,50	79,43
8,18	11,51	18,19	41,8	57,48	79,54
8,19	11,52	18,22	41,9	57,50	79,57
8,20	11,56	18,28	41,12	58,48	80,19
8,35	11,58	18,32	41,14	58,50	80,20

8,38	12,2	18,38	41,18	59,48	80,29
8,42	12,4	20,19	41,19	59,50	80,44
8,44	12,5	20,45	41,20	60,48	80,57
8,45	12,6	22,6	41,29	60,50	80,58
8,46	12,7	23,17	41,35	61,17	
8,47	12,8	23,52	41,38	61,48	

APPENDIX B

LIFE A USER'S MANUAL COMPENDIUM WORK

B.1 Life A User's Manual Compendium

1 The Coronation at Covadonga of Alkhamah's victor, Don Pelage
2 The Russian singer and Schonberg living in Holland as exiles
3 The deaf cat on the top floor with one blue & one yellow eye
4 Barrels of sand being filled by order of the fumbling cretin
5 The miserly old woman marking all her expenses in a notebook
6 The puzzlemaker's backgammon game giving him his bad tempers
7 The concierge watering potted plants for residents when away
8 The parents naming their son Gilbert after Becaud their idol
9 A bigamous count's wife accepting his Turkish female rescuer
10 The businesswoman, regretting that she had to leave the land
11 The boy taking down the bins dreaming how to write his novel
12 The Australian round-the-worlder and her well-dressed nephew
13 The anthropologist, failing to locate the ever-evasive tribe
14 The cook's refusal of an oven with the self-cleansing device
15 1% sacrificed to art by the MD of a world-wide hotel company
16 The nurse casually leafing through a shiny new photomagazine
17 The poet who went on a pilgrimage shipwrecked at Arkhangelsk
18 The impatient Italian violinplayer who riled his miniaturist
19 The fat, sausage-eating couple keeping their wireless set on
20 The one-armed officer after the bombardment of General H.-Q.
21 The daughter's sad reveries, at the side of her father's bed
22 Austrian customers getting just the steamiest "Turkish Bath"
23 The Paraguayan odd-job man, getting ready to ignite a letter
24 The billionaire sporting knickerbockers to practice painting
25 The Woods & Water Dept. official opens a sanctuary for birds
26 The widow with her souvenirs wrapped in old weekly magazines
27 An international thief taken to be a high-ranking magistrate
28 Robinson Crusoe leading a very decent life style on his isle
29 The domino-playing rodent who feasted on dried-out Edam rind
30 The suffering "word-snuffer" messing around in old bookshops
31 The black-clad investigator selling the latest key to dreams
32 The man in vegetable oils opening a fish restaurant in Paris

33 The famous old soldier killed by a loose Venetian chandelier
34 The injured cyclist who then married his pace-maker's sister
35 The cook whose master ingested only eggs and poached haddock
36 The newly-weds taking credit over 2 yrs to have a luxury bed
37 The art dealer's deserted wife, left for an Italian Angelina
38 The childhood friend reading the biographies of her 5 nieces
39 The gentleman who inserted into bottles figures made of cork
40 An archaeologist researching the Arab kings' Spanish capital
41 The Pole living quietly in the Oise now his clowning is over
42 The hag who cut the hot water to stop her son-in-law shaving
43 A Dutchman who knew any No. could be but the sum of K primes
44 Robert Scipion devising his supremely clever cross-word clue
45 The scientist learning to lip-read the deaf-mute's equations
46 The Albanian terrorist serenading his love, an American star
47 The Stuttgarter businessman wanting to roast his leg of boar
48 Dodeca's owner's son preferring the porn trade to priesthood
49 A barman speaking pidgin in order to swap his mother-goddess
50 The boy seeing in his dream the cake he had not been allowed
51 7 actors each refusing the role after they'd seen the script
52 A deserter from US forces in Korea allowing his squad to die
53 The superstar who started out as a sex-changed guitar-player
54 A redheaded white man enjoying a rich maharajah's tiger hunt
55 A liberal grandfather moved to creation by a detective story
56 The expert penman copying suras from the Koran in the casbah
57 Angelica's aria from Arconati's Orlando requested by Orfanik
58 The actor plotting suicide with the help of a foster brother
59 Her arm held high a Japanese athlete bears the Olympic torch
60 Embattled Aetius stopping the Huns on the Catalaunian Fields
61 Selim's arrow hitting the end wall of a room 888 metres long
62 The staff sergeant deceasing because of his rubber-gum binge
63 The mate of the Fox alighting on Fitz-James's final messages
64 The student staying in a room for six months without budging
65 The producer's wife off yet again on a trip around the globe
66 The central-heating engineer making sure the fueljet ignites
67 The executive who entertained all his workmates very grandly
68 The boy sorting medical blotters he'd been collecting avidly
69 The actor-cook hired by an American lady who was hugely rich
70 The former croupier who turned into a shy, retiring old lady
71 The technician trying a new experiment, and losing 3 fingers
72 The young lady living in the Ardennes with a Belgian builder
73 The Dr's ancestor nearly solving the synthetic gem conundrum

74 The ravishing American magician and Mephisto agreeing a deal
75 The curio dealer's son in red leather on his Guzzi motorbike
76 The principal destroying the secrets of the German scientist
77 The historian, turned down 46 times, burning his 1200-pp. MS
78 A Jap who turned a quartz watch Co into a gigantic syndicate
79 The Swedish diplomat trying madly to avenge his son and wife
80 The delayed voyager begging to have her green beans returned
81 The star seeking admission by meditating a recipe for afters
82 The lady who was interested in hoarding clockwork mechanisms
83 The magician guessing answers with digits selected at random
84 The Russian prince presenting a mahogany sofa shaped in an S
85 The superfluous driver playing cardgames to use up his hours
86 A medic, hoping to make a mark on gastronomy with crab salad
87 An optimistic engineer liquidating his exotic hides business
88 The Japanese sage initiating in great anguish Three Free Men
89 A selftaught old man again going over his sanatorium stories
90 A relative twice removed, obliged to auction his inheritance
91 Customs & Excise men unpacking the raging princess's samovar
92 The trader in Indian cotton goods doing up a flat on the 8th
93 French-style overtures brought to the Hamburg opera by a Hun
94 Marguerite, restoring things seen through a magnifying glass
95 The puzzlemaker with his ginger cat taking the name of Cheri
96 The nightclub waiter, legging up on stage to start a cabaret
97 The rich amateur leaving his musical collection to a library
98 A housing and estate agency woman looking at that empty flat
99 The lady doing the Englishman's black cardboard puzzle boxes
100 The critic committing 4 crimes for 1 of Percival's seascapes
101 The Praetor ordering 30000 Lusitanians to be killed in a day
102 A student in a long coat staring at a map of the Paris metro
103 The building manager, trying to solve his cash-flow problems
104 The girl studying the craftsman's rings to sell in her store
105 Nationalists fighting the Damascene publisher who was French
106 A little girl gnawing at the edges of her shortbread cookies
107 The maid, imagining she'd seen the evil eye in an undertaker
108 A painstaking scientist examining rats' reactions to poisons
109 The pranking student who but beef stock in vegetarians' soup
110 A workman gazing at his letter, as he leaves with two others
111 The aged gentleman's gentleman recomputing his nth factorial
112 The staggered priest offering help to a Frenchman lost in NY
113 The druggist spending his fortune on the Holy Vase of Joseph
114 The jigsaw glue being perfected by a head of a chemistry lab

115 That gent in a black cloak donning new, tight-fitting gloves
116 Old Guyomard cutting Bellmer's sheet in 2 through the middle
117 Original fine champagne proffered to Colbert by Dom Perignon
118 A gay waltz being written by an old friend of Liszt & Chopin
119 Agreeably drowsy after lunch, M. Riri sitting at his counter
120 Gallant Amerigo learning a continent was to be named America
121 Mark Twain reading his obituary long before he'd intended to
122 The woman polishing a dagger that was Kleber's murder weapon
123 The college endowed by its ex-rector, an expert in philology
124 The single mother reading Pirandello's story of Daddi, Romeo
125 The historian who used pseudonyms to publish rubbishy novels
126 The librarian collecting proof that Hitler continues to live
127 A blind man tuning a Russian prima donna's grand piano-forte
128 A decorator making the most of the young pig's crimson bones
129 The agent trading cowries believing he'd make millions at it
130 The disappointed customer who in dyeing her hair lost it all
131 The assistant librarian using red pencil to ring opera crits
132 The lovelorn coachman who thought he's heard a rodent mewing
133 The kitchen-lads bringing up hot tasty snacks for a grand do
134 The nurse's milk jug spilt on the carpet by two naughty cats
135 A Tommy and his bride-to-be stuck between floors in the lift
136 The bookdealer who found three of Victor Hugo's original MSS
137 The English "au pair" reading an epistle from her boy-friend
138 The ordnance general who was shot in the lounge of his hotel
139 The doctor whom loaded fire-arms forced to carry out surgery
140 Safari-buffs with their native guide - posing for the camera
141 The French prof, getting pupils' vacation assignments marked
142 A beautiful Polish woman and her wee son dreaming of Tunisia
143 The judge's spouse whose pearls had cooked black in the fire
144 The cyclist struggling for recognition for his 1-hour record
145 A conscript startled on seeing his old physics schoolteacher
146 The ex-landlord dreaming of a "hero" of the traditional kind
147 A conductor rehearsing his band for 9 weeks, again and again
148 A gifted numerate, aspiring to construct a massive radiomast
149 Antipodean fans giving their idol a present of 71 white mice
150 The Spanish ex-concierge not too keen to unjam the lift door
151 Listening to an enormous phonogram, a smoker of an 89c cigar
152 A choreographer, returning to torment the loveless ballerina
153 The man who delivered wine on a trike doing the hall mirrors
154 An obviously pornographic old man waiting at the school gate
155 The botanist hoping an ivory Epiphyllum would carry his name

156 The so-called Russian who solved every brainteaser published
157 The infant Mozart, performing for Louis and Marie-Antoinette
158 A sword-swallower who on medication threw up a load of nails
159 A man who made religious articles dying of cold in the woods
160 Blind horses, deep down in the mine, hauling railway waggons
161 A urologist musing on the arguments of Galen and Asclepiades
162 A handsome pilot looking for the castle at Corbenic on a map
163 The carpenter's workman warming his hands at a woodchip fire
164 Visitors to the Orient trying to solve the magic ring puzzle
165 A ballet maestro beaten to death in the U.S.A. by 3 hoodlums
166 A princess, who said prayers at her regal granddad's bedside
167 The tenant (for 6 wks) insisting on full checks on all pipes
168 A manager who managed to be away for four months in the year
169 A lady who owned a curio shop fishing for a malosol cucumber
170 The man who saw his own death warrant in a newspaper cutting
171 The emperor thinking of the "Eagle" to attack the Royal Navy
172 Famous works improved by a celebrated artist's layer of haze
173 Eugene of Savoy having a list made of the relics of Golgotha
174 In a polka-dot dress, a woman who knitted beside the seaside
175 The Tommies enjoying girls' gym practices on a Pacific beach
176 Gedeon Spilett locating the last match in his trouser pocket
177 A young trapeze artist refusing to climb down from his perch
178 Woodworms' hollow honeycombs solidified by an Italian artist
179 Lonely Valene putting every bit of the block onto his canvas

B.2 Life A User's Manual *Compendium Perl Code for Pattern Search*

```
print "\n\n\n";

$target = "a"; # change to the letter we want to visualize
$target = $ARGV[0] if ($ARGV[0]);

open (IN, "compendium.txt");
# read in the Compendium, reproduced in Appendix B Section 1
while (<IN>) {
    chomp;
    @chars = split('');
    foreach $c (@chars) {
        # if character matches the one we're visualizing,
        # print 0, else print blank space
        if (lc($c) eq $target) {
            print "0";
        } else {
            print " ";
        }
    }
    print "\n";
}
close IN;

print "\n\n\n";
```

Figure 39: *Life A User's Manual* Compendium Perl Code for Pattern Search

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